

Life Health



Molly Halper had struggled with post-partum depression twice before, so with her youngest child, Georgette, Halper ingested encapsulated placenta pills made for her by her birth coach. She said the results were remarkable.  
STACY WESCOTT/TRIBUNE NEWS-PAPERS PHOTO

# Some new moms swear by consuming baby's placenta

They cite less depression, better breast milk production; experts point to placebo effect

By ABBY OLENA  
Tribune Newspapers

Molly Halper never dreamed she'd consume her baby's placenta, an organ that serves as a link between mother and fetus and is usually discarded after birth.

"My husband and I used to make jokes about people who did that," said Halper. "We're not vegetarians or tree-hugging, granola-eating people. We're suburban Republicans. We thought it was some hippie thing."

But after struggling twice with the baby blues and needing to supplement her breast milk supply with formula, Halper became intrigued by the idea that the hormones in a placenta could help. To reduce the risk factor, Halper paid someone to process the tissue into capsules when her third child was born.

Medical experts say there is no scientific evidence that consuming placenta benefits women, as no controlled studies have tested it versus a placebo. Nor have placenta pills been analyzed to see what substances they contain.

"Until all the science is in, the cautions outweigh the expected benefits," said Mark Kristal, a New York neuroscientist who has studied placentophagy — the scientific name for placenta consumption — in laboratory animals.

Yet the idea is popular

enough that Halper's doula, Deb Pocius, said she has encapsulated more than 250 placentas for about \$260 apiece. Pocius said she also has trained 30 people to make placenta capsules, mostly in the Chicago area.

Women who have consumed their baby's placenta claim benefits including reduction of fatigue, a more balanced mood and increased breast milk production.

Those reported gains also could be nothing more than the placebo effect, some doctors and researchers say. Encapsulation and digestion probably would destroy at least one class of hormones in the placenta, they note.

Halper said her doctors didn't object to her plan. Worst-case scenario, they said, the pills would have no effect. Her husband also was supportive. So after Halper's daughter was born, Pocius encapsulated the placenta and Halper took the pills for about six weeks.

Physically, she felt energetic and recovered quickly, Halper said. She was able to breast-feed her daughter without supplementing with formula, and she had no problems with the baby blues. At her six-week appointment, her obstetrician remarked on how well she seemed to be doing.

"I was so shocked at how much better I felt," Halper said. "I can't recommend it

## Making the capsules

Hospitals have varying policies on keeping the placenta. Northwestern Memorial Hospital in Chicago, for instance, requires the mother to sign a release form. She then is asked to take personal possession and transfer it out of the hospital, said Sun Futara, operations manager of triage and labor and delivery.

Doula Deb Pocius makes placenta capsules and said the woman's partner or another family member usually brings the placenta home on ice. Pocius likes to start the encapsulation process within 24 to 48 hours.

First she lightly steams the placenta, then dehydrates it overnight in a food dehydrator. The next day she grinds the dried placenta into a powder and puts the powder into capsules, which are kept in the fridge. She said she sterilizes all her equipment and wears gloves.

the first author, Jodi Selander, is the founder of Placenta Benefits, an online information source that also offers training for placenta encapsulators. Kristal, a professor of psychology at the State University of New York at Buffalo, has documented some benefits among rats that consumed raw placentas and amniotic fluid after giving birth. But he cautioned against attributing benefits to placenta consumption by human mothers.

"The science in humans just isn't there," he said. "There's nothing we can point to that says scientifically that eating placenta is helpful and that it is completely harmless."

Beryshek said he is in



CAROLYN VAN HOUTEN/PHOTO FOR TRIBUNE NEWS-PAPERS

the final planning stages of a double-blind pilot study that would compare the effects of placenta capsules and a placebo on women's postpartum experiences.

The placenta, a rounded organ roughly the size of a Frisbee, grows inside the womb and serves as the boundary between woman and fetus, delivering nutrients and oxygen via the umbilical cord and carrying away waste and carbon dioxide. It also takes over a mother's hormone production during pregnancy.

Many other female mammals, including humans' closest primate relatives, eat the placenta soon after birth, but there is no evidence that the behavior is common in new mothers from any human culture, according to Kristal and Beryshek.

Kristal's work on laboratory rats has found that consuming both amniotic fluid and placenta leads to an increased tolerance for pain and quicker onset of maternal behavior by modifying how some signals are processed in the brain. He thinks the molecule that contributes to those positive effects probably is present and can function in people, too.

Yet Kristal said he suspects most benefits that mothers report from consuming their baby's placenta are rooted in the placebo effect. He notes that, among women who cite benefits, it does not

seem to matter how the placenta is prepared, when the woman consumes it or how much she consumes.

"It's almost part of human nature to assign causality where it doesn't necessarily exist," Kristal said. "Two things happen and people relate them in their minds. We all do it."

Dr. Marybeth Lore, an assistant professor of obstetrics and gynecology at the Northwestern University Feinberg School of Medicine, said she also thinks benefits can be attributed to the placebo effect. Still, she added, it's hard to find fault with a placebo if it improves symptoms.

Kristal said he thinks one type of placental product — molecules called peptides — would be destroyed during processing or later in the digestive tract. But steroid hormones, which include progesterone and estrogen, could be intact in placenta pills and survive digestion to be absorbed in the small intestine, he said.

None of those ideas has been scientifically tested, he emphasized. Nor is it clear whether consuming a placenta could be dangerous.

"I don't think it's a huge risk. I think it's possibly a slight risk," Kristal said. "We just have to be very careful about whether there's a negative side to it or not."

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# Can eye blinks diagnose mental illness?

This news just in from Aberdeen University in Scotland: An eye movement test to assist diagnosis of major adult psychiatric disorders has made the final stage of a prestigious national contest recognizing Scotland's entrepreneurial innovations.

Devised by researchers from the University of Aberdeen, the test recognizes unusual eye movements to help clinicians identify illnesses such as schizophrenia, bipolar disorder and severe depression. It is hoped the assessment will make the process of reaching an accurate diagnosis more efficient.

The plan to commercialize the test for use in mental health care worldwide competed against five other finalists in the 2013 Convergence Challenge Awards on Tuesday.

Dr. Philip Benson, a senior lecturer in psychology and one of



Newport News will offer a clinic with free rabies shots for cats and dogs. Vaccination is the most effective way of containing the disease.

the academics behind the test said: "Delivering an accurate and timely diagnosis remains one of the most pressing responsibilities of modern psychiatry. There aren't any objective diagnostic tests available to routinely validate decisions made by clinicians.

"It has been known for over a

hundred years that individuals with psychotic symptoms are unable to smoothly track slowly moving objects with their eyes. Their gaze tends to lag behind the object and then catch up with it by making rapid skips called saccades."

## Forums and flu shots

■ The Environmental Health

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Symposium hosted by the Southeast CARE Coalition (Community Action for a Renewed Environment) will meet from 9:30 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. on Saturday at Chesapeake Baptist Church, 5405 Roundlake Ave., Newport News.

Keynote speakers are U.S. Rep. Robert C. "Bobby" Scott, D-Newport News, and Dr. Marva King, national co-chair of U.S. Environmental Protection Agency's CARE program.

event is free and open to the public. For more information, go to [www.southeastcare.com](http://www.southeastcare.com) and click on "2013 Environmental Health Symposium."

■ On Saturday, Sentara is offering drive-through flu shots from 8 a.m. to noon at eight locations: in Carrollton, Gloucester, Newport News, Suffolk, Virginia Beach and Williamsburg.

Shots are offered while supplies last. No appointment is needed.

Shots are for adults only and cost \$10. Payment is by cash or check. The new vaccine protects against three strains that scientists believe will be the most prevalent this season.

The locations include Belle Harbour in Suffolk; Sentara Gloucester Medical Arts in Gloucester; Sentara Medical Arts & Urgent Care, New Town, Williamsburg; Sentara Port Warwick at corner of Jefferson Avenue and Loftis Boulevard in Newport News.

Check for more information at [www.sentara.com](http://www.sentara.com).

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