



Study notes women's food-risk concerns when pregnant or breastfeeding

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Research news

Researchers at the University of Granada warn that the information women receive is often highly complex, showing the need for healthcare and academic institutions to provide well-structured and clear information based exclusively on scientific evidence

A study, in which the University of Granada (UGR) participated, has shown that pregnant and breastfeeding women have many concerns regarding food risks and chemical contaminants present in foodstuffs.

The study, published recently in the scientific journal *Appetite*, highlights the need for healthcare and academic institutions to provide structured, clear, and evidence-based information.

Pregnancy and breastfeeding are both periods in the life-cycle of women in which they feel particularly concerned about the possible impact of their lifestyle on the health of the baby. During such periods, food becomes a central issue linked to their health, in a context marked by the process of 'medicalisation' of food—which can be a source of exposure to environmental contaminants potentially harmful to the mother and the baby, such as pesticides, metals, or industrial pollutants.

In this research, the UGR team investigated the attitudes of pregnant and breastfeeding women in relation to food-risk and chemical contaminants present in food. The project was coordinated by the University of Barcelona (UB) and funded by Spain's Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness. It involved a highly



multidisciplinary team of researchers, including different specialties such as anthropology, epidemiology, psychiatry, psychology, nursing, and philosophy, from various prestigious institutions such as UGR and UB, the Biohealth Research Institute in Granada (ibs.GRANADA), Rovira i Virgili University, and the Norte Málaga-Antequera and Norte de Almería Health Districts of the Andalusian Health Service.

The study was conducted on pregnant and breastfeeding women residing in Barcelona, Tarragona, Almería, and Granada. Using various qualitative research techniques, scientists were able to demonstrate that women share significant concerns caused by the large volume of information they receive on the subject, some of it contradictory.

“So the very same food may generate more, or less, mistrust, depending on its characteristics and how it has been produced, handled, or distributed or where it has been acquired,” explains **Juan Pedro Arrebola**, researcher from the UGR’s Department of Preventive Medicine and Public Health and one of the authors of the article.

Likewise, the same food can have both positive and negative qualities or can have different meanings in the same context. This leads to a highly complexity range of responses, because mothers are also immersed in a world in which the information of doctors, the media, the ideological options of food consumption, and traditional discourses all converge on a daily basis.

Is tuna good or bad?

“For example, some mothers argue that packaging prevents microbial contamination and makes food safer for them and their babies, while others are suspicious of packaging because of the possibility it may transmit harmful chemicals to food, particularly when packaged in plastics and cans. Another mixed message can be observed in relation to the consumption of tuna and other large fish, which some mothers perceive as very positive because of its omega-3 fatty acid content, as this may help in child development, but others are concerned about, fearing that high levels of mercury found in these fish can have a negative effect on the baby,” says Arrebola.

In general, women showed more trust in the food described as fresh, natural, organic, whole, seasonal, local, orchard-grown, homemade, artisan, or pre-washed. By contrast, foods described as processed, industrial, pre-cooked, prepared, packaged, canned, fried, or from outside the European Union generated greater rejection, as the women associated them with low quality and health risks—even though most of them admitted consuming them regularly.

This study constitutes a major step in terms of advancing the primary area of interest of the research group of the UGR and the Biohealth Research Institute in Granada. This wider investigation focuses on the influence of the environment on human health, from a holistic point of view and taking a mixed methodological approach including both qualitative and quantitative techniques.

“In fact, the results of this study helped us identify information needs and draw up information guides for pregnant and breastfeeding women, which provide simple guidelines on how to reduce exposure to toxic substances and are available for free download via the website of our research group (www.ub.edu/toxicbody/es/guia),” concludes Arrebola.

Bibliography:

Araceli Muñoz, Andrés Fontalba-Navas, Juan Pedro Arrebola, and Cristina Larrea-Killinger, ‘Trust and distrust in relation to food risks in Spain: An approach to the socio-cultural representations of pregnant and breastfeeding women through the technique of free listing’, *Appetite*, 142, 2019, 104365.

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UGR researcher Juan Pedro Arrebola took part in this study.



The authors have designed information guides for pregnant and breastfeeding women, which provide simple guidelines on how to reduce

exposure to toxic substances.