

TEACHER INFORMATION

What about food cravings?

The yearning for a particular type of food is an undeniable part of carrying a baby; about 85 percent of women report at least one food craving during pregnancy. And not all of these cravings can be neatly cataloged — or stomachied. You confessed to wanting pickles wrapped in cheese, salsa spooned straight out of the jar, and yes, even steak fat. And where in the spectrum of sweet, salty, spicy, and sour does one woman's passion for black olives on Sara Lee cheesecake lie? Another reader told us she ate a steady diet of Cheese Whiz sandwiches, which she now (postpartum) can't bear the sight of. Eggplant, particularly on pizza, was another reader's obsession.

Many of these cravings seem to come out of nowhere, with a ferocity that is overpowering. Where do they come from? Hormones, right? Maybe, says Elizabeth Somer, author of *Nutrition for a Healthy Pregnancy*. The extreme hormonal changes women go through during pregnancy can have a powerful impact on taste and smell. (This would help explain why women going through menopause can also experience strong food cravings and aversions.) But the bottom line, says Somer, is that no one really knows for sure.

Some experts are skeptical about the idea that food cravings can be attributed simply to hormones. Ronald Chez, a professor of obstetrics and gynecology at the University of South Florida, notes that pregnancy has a similar effect on every woman's body, while cravings vary widely from person to person. "No one really understands what causes cravings," says Chez. "No absolute cause has been scientifically established."

What do food cravings mean?

As to what a particular craving signifies, the answer depends on whom you ask. Some nutritionists and healthcare practitioners believe that certain cravings may be meaningful. For example, cravings for ice and bizarre substances such as laundry starch and cigarette butts (a condition called pica) have been linked to an iron deficiency — even though none of these items contain significant amounts of iron. In fact, a number of our readers reported consuming large quantities of ice, which they had never craved before, during their pregnancies.

San Francisco midwife and herbalist Cindy Belew says that other food cravings may be worth paying attention to as well. For example, alternative medicine practitioners believe that a shortage of B vitamins can trigger a craving for chocolate. Belew has also found that many of her patients need more essential fatty acids in their diet; when they start taking flax oil, their food cravings disappear. Similarly, a craving for red meat seems like a transparent cry for protein. And the reader who consumed great quantities of peaches may have been responding to her body's need for beta carotene.

Still, Somer doesn't see much of a link between a pregnant woman's cravings and what her body needs. "People think their cravings are significant, but studies show no link between cravings and nutritional requirements," she says. "If people craved what the body needs, we would all eat more broccoli and less chocolate."

What to do about your cravings

In the end, the experts we consulted agreed that you should pay attention to your pregnancy cravings — indulging the healthy ones and coming up with alternatives to the less healthy cravings. "Most cravings and aversions are more interesting than serious and, for the most part, can be indulged in moderation," Somer says. "A healthful diet should be one that meets your nutritional and your emotional needs, as well as your preferences." She recommends that pregnant women humor their cravings rather than fight them by, say, substituting nonfat frozen yogurt for ice cream.

Other ways to curb unhealthy cravings: Eat breakfast every day (skipping breakfast can make cravings worse), get plenty of exercise, and make sure you have lots of emotional support. This last is particularly important, says Somer. "The ebb and flow of emotions that accompanies pregnancy can cause you to turn to food," says Somer, "when what you really need is a hug."