

Cravings, Pica and Aversions - are they good or bad?

Week 12 hits and you suddenly start eating mandarin's, heaps and heaps of mandarin's and you know what might go really well with them? Strawberry ice-cream and pickles! Wait, what??!! This is where pregnancy cravings might have kicked in.

It's common during pregnancy to get the odd craving or two and maybe weird combinations of foods that you wouldn't usually put together. Around 50-90% of pregnant women have specific food cravings at some stage during their pregnancy and as long as they are normal foods, this is usually ok - we will get to non food sources and aversions later.

Research doesn't know exactly why pregnant women get the urge for specific tastes, textures, or flavor combinations. Rapidly changing hormones might be to blame. Some think it represents some nutrients that the mother may be lacking and the crave is the body's way of asking for what it needs. Or it might be as simple as the comfort certain foods bring as your body changes.

The types of food craved over the course of pregnancy seem to follow patterns too. In the 1st trimester you may find you crave = savoury foods, in the 2nd trimester = sweet food cravings may be what you are searching for and in the 3rd trimester = salty foods are quite often a 'go to' food group.

How you handle your cravings could make a big difference with your pregnancy journey. If you are craving high-fat premium ice cream and chocolate doughnuts and eating them all the time, you could see your weight blossom to an unhealthy level quite early on, which, if you are at risk for gestational diabetes (diabetes diagnosed during pregnancy that can affect the health of both baby and mum), giving in to high-sugar cravings could cause even more problems. It's all about understanding what your craving is really for and then potentially finding a more healthy version of that same food, and make a simple substitution such as swapping the chocolate ice-cream for non fat frozen yoghurt or sorbet.

So, are pregnancy cravings bad for you? In itself, no. You should eat what you are craving when you are craving it. Mostly, you should make sure to appreciate the moment, whatever the food you crave is!

While some pregnancy cravings can certainly seem a bit odd, in most instances, they don't represent any real threat to mother or the baby. This, however, can change dramatically, when the craving is for a nonfood item. The condition, known as pica, can lead to an overwhelming desire to consume any number of substances (some of which can be extremely harmful to both mother and baby) such as soil, clay, laundry starch, ice, ashes, plaster, paint chips, and coffee grounds. The medical term comes from the Latin name for magpie (*Pica pica*), a bird that's said to eat almost anything.

While we don't actually know for certain what causes pica, one suggestion could be an iron deficiency or poor nutrition. There aren't any specific tests for pica but your LMC or health care professional may request a blood test to check for low levels of iron or zinc.



But craving nonfood items doesn't necessarily mean you have any sort of deficiency. BUT, it definitely doesn't mean you should consume them. Eating nonfood substances can interfere with your body's ability to absorb nutrients and may even cause a deficiency. And eating ice is not likely to be harmful (except possibly to your teeth), but eating other nonfood items may lead to health problems, such as lead poisoning or even a bowel blockage - Eekkk!

Your LMC may also check for any underlying physical or psychological problem that could affect you or your baby. And just talking with them about these feelings may help you deal with them in a healthy way.

If you've suddenly taken a dislike to a particular food, taste or texture and possibly from foods that you previously liked, you may have a food aversion to it. During pregnancy Mums sense of smell is heightened, this may lead to an aversion to particular food - usually proteins such as meat, fish and eggs, another contributor maybe nausea or you've just changed your mind - we are allowed to do this!

Eating the foods you enjoy, and avoiding foods you don't feel like eating, is generally a good approach in pregnancy so long as it's done in moderation. If the foods you have an aversion for include meat or a particular vegetable, consider how you might substitute these for other alternatives. For example, substitute meat for nuts. Another option is to 'disguise' leafy green vegetables by blending them into smoothies with fruit. This way, you get the same nutrients and essential vitamins despite your changing food preferences. Remember that generally, appetite changes during pregnancy are unlikely to harm you or your baby or significantly compromise your nutrition. If you are unsure about which foods are most important for your diet, or you have no appetite for foods containing important nutrients, seek advice.

