

Peanut Butter and Pregnancy

This article was originally published in the monthly Ask the Midwife column that appeared from 2003-2007 in the Willy Street Reader in Madison, WI. Ingrid Andersson, CNM, addressed questions related to health and nutrition in the childbearing year.

Question: I'm 11 weeks pregnant and remember hearing some time ago that peanut butter should be avoided during pregnancy because some peanut butters contain bacteria. Is this correct, or have you heard or read anything about this? I've been unable to find anything about it, and am having a craving that I really need to satisfy!! Please help.

I believe you are referring to aflatoxin, a natural toxin and carcinogen produced by certain strains of the mold *Aspergillus flavus* and *A. parasiticus*. Aflatoxins often occur in peanut crops in the field prior to harvest. Post-harvest contamination can occur if crop-drying is delayed and during storage of the peanuts, where excessive moisture produces fungal growth. Insect and rodent infestations can worsen the mold problem.

Crops with the highest risk of aflatoxin contamination are corn, peanuts, and cottonseed, but aflatoxins are detected occasionally also in milk, cheese, nuts, almonds, figs, spices, and a variety of other foods and feeds. Milk, eggs, and meat products are sometimes contaminated due aflatoxin-contaminated peanut, corn, and cottonseed animal feeds.

Does all this mean you have to swear off peanut butter?

I asked one of my students to email her favorite peanut butter producer to ask how they handle aflatoxin. East Wind Nut Butters wrote back: "East Wind participates in monthly testing of our nut butters for aflatoxins. This is required by OCIA, our organic certifier, and we are happy to have our nuts tested. Our nuts have tested negative for all aflatoxins. If our nuts do test positive (which they have not) we would throw away all nuts affected as well as pull all corresponding butter out of our inventory." Sounds good to me.

The U.S. government tests crops for aflatoxin and doesn't permit them to be used for human or animal food if they contain levels over 20 parts per billion. However, while heavily contaminated food supplies are not permitted in the market place in developed countries, concern remains over potential long-term exposure to low levels of aflatoxins in the food supply.

The question of safety regarding peanut consumption in pregnancy is not limited to aflatoxin however. As a peanut butter lover, you obviously do not suffer from a peanut allergy. However America has a growing and serious peanut allergy problem, and that is why the can of soup or bag of cookies in your cupboard must have allergen information on its label, e.g. "this product is manufactured in a facility that processes foods containing peanuts, soy....."

Peanut protein crosses the placenta and is secreted into breast milk. In the late 1990s, the medical community hypothesized that exposure to peanut protein during pregnancy and breastfeeding may result in sensitization of a predisposed infant and sensitize a child, so that later on, he or she may have a severe allergic reaction when eating peanuts or peanut-containing foods.

The good news for all peanut butter loving moms, is that recent studies comparing peanut allergies in different parts of the world suggest that avoidance of peanuts may be the exactly wrong strategy for preventing allergy! Recent research found an inverse association between consumption of peanuts in the first year of life and the development of peanut allergy, meaning children who eat peanut-containing foods before 1 year of age appear to be protected against peanut allergy. Randomized controlled research is underway to further explore this finding.

It's important to state that the World Health Organization's strategy to prevent food allergies is to promote exclusive breastfeeding during at least the first six months of an infant's life.

It's also worth noting that allergic reactions in general take place when the body over-responds to a particular substance. Each subsequent exposure tends to cause a larger self-protective over-response in the body. There is evidence indicating that common trigger foods – those containing derivatives of soy, wheat, cow's milk, corn, or peanuts – are over-abundant in our monocultural food supply. Peanuts show up not only as finger snacks and peanut butter, but also as oil and fillers in packaged cereals, cakes, cookies, crackers, breads, salad dressings, ice cream, toppings, restaurant foods, and many skin care and hygiene products, not to mention the feed most farm animals get!

Furthermore, peanuts may pose a cross-sensitivity problem with soy. Peanuts are in fact a legume and not actually a nut and share protein molecule properties with soybeans. Infants fed soy formula have a statistically increased incidence of childhood peanut allergy. Last but not least, our most common food allergens occur in crops that bear big burdens of pesticides. Peanuts are often grown as a rotation crop with cotton, a heavily sprayed commercial commodity. I have been unable to find any research exploring the role of organic vs non-organic peanut sources.

What does this all mean? Keep eating peanut butter! As with all food, avoid too much of a good thing and choose organic whenever possible.

Peanuts are a cholesterol-free, protein-rich, healthy fat powerhouse in a diverse diet. Peanuts contain 40 mcg of folate, or natural folic acid, per 1 oz. serving (approximately 30 peanuts or 2-3 tablespoons of chunky peanut butter). Peanuts are an excellent source of niacin, pantothenic acid and biotin as well as other B vitamins, vitamin E, iron, calcium and potassium. Peanuts are rich in tryptophan, an amino acid that promotes a healthy nervous system, as well as sounder sleep. Peanuts are the richest source of boron, followed by almonds and hazelnuts. Boron is a trace mineral that plays an important role in bone health. It is thought to reduce loss of calcium and magnesium and increase concentrations of circulating estrogens.

Look for peanut butter brands containing only peanuts or peanuts and salt. Avoid raw peanuts and peanuts with hydrogenated oils, sugar and other additives. And don't forget delicious almond butter and cashew butter, which boast a better fatty acid profile, and heart-healthy walnuts, which are high in omega-3s.

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