

Pregnant women should avoid liquorice, new study confirms

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Credit: University of Helsinki

A new Finnish study supports food recommendations for families with children in that women should avoid consuming large amounts of liquorice during pregnancy. The limit for safe consumption is not known.

In the study, youths that were exposed to large amounts of liquorice in the womb performed less well than others in cognitive reasoning tests carried out by a psychologist. The difference was equivalent to approximately seven IQ points.

Those exposed to liquorice also performed less well in tasks measuring memory capacity, and according to parental estimates, they had more ADHD-type problems than others. With girls, puberty had started earlier and advanced further.

The Glaku study carried out by the University of Helsinki, the National Institute for Health and Welfare and the Helsinki and Uusimaa hospital districts compared 378 youths of about 13 years whose mothers had consumed "large amounts" or "little/no" liquorice during pregnancy. In this study a large amount was defined as over 500 mg and little/no as less than 249 mg glycyrrhizin per week. These cutoffs are not based on health effects. 500 mg glycyrrhizin corresponds on average to 250 g liquorice.

The study report was published in the *American Journal of Epidemiology*. The first author of the article is Academy Professor Katri Räikkönen from the University of Helsinki.

Researchers suggest that [pregnant women](#) and women planning pregnancy should be informed of the harmful effects that products containing glycyrrhizin - such as liquorice and salty liquorice - may have on the fetus.

In Finland, this is already reality. In January 2016, the National Institute for Health and Welfare published food recommendations for families with children, in which liquorice was placed in the 'not recommended' category for pregnant women. According to the recommendations, occasional consumption of small amounts such as a portion of liquorice

ice cream or a few liquorice sweets is not dangerous.

Researchers underline that things should be kept in proportion. A large number of Finns have been exposed to glycyrrhizin in the womb. Glycyrrhizin is one of many factors that affect the development of a fetus but it is impossible to say whether it was glycyrrhizin expressly that affected the development of a certain individual.

As a result of animal experiments, the biological mechanism of the effects of [liquorice](#) is well known. Glycyrrhizin intensifies the effects of [stress hormone cortisol](#) by inhibiting the enzyme that inactivates cortisol. While cortisol is essential to the development of a fetus, it is detrimental in large amounts.

It has long been known that glycyrrhizin causes higher blood pressure and shorter pregnancies in humans, but such long-lasting effects on the fetus have not been proven before.

More information: Maternal Licorice Consumption During Pregnancy and Pubertal, Cognitive, and Psychiatric Outcomes in Children, *American Journal Of Epidemiology* (2016). [DOI: 10.1093/aje/kww172](https://doi.org/10.1093/aje/kww172) , [academic.oup.com/aje/article-a ...](https://academic.oup.com/aje/article-a...) [During-Pregnancy-and](#)

Provided by University of Helsinki

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