

Pregnancy apps could be encouraging eating disorders, experts warn



Several smartphone apps are offering women advice inconsistent with NHS guidance on what to eat while pregnant. File picture. Credit: ANDREW MATHURUS/PA

Popular pregnancy apps could be wrongly telling women to cut foods from their diet and could be encouraging eating disorders, health experts have warned.

A *Telegraph* investigation found a number of smartphone apps, which have been downloaded thousands of times are offering women advice inconsistent with NHS guidance on what to eat while pregnant.

Items wrongly included on lists of "foods to avoid" were chamomile tea, tuna sandwiches, eggs, soda and pepperoni pizza.

According to the NHS, women should avoid raw meat, mould-ripened soft cheeses, alcohol, certain types of fish, liver and pate. Canned tuna is safe to eat but should be limited to four cans per week.

It also provides nutritional guidance for pregnant women such as safe caffeine intake.

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Sarah Walford, a London-based nutritionist, described the apps' advice as "ridiculous" and warned that providing women with long lists of "unsafe" foods could lead to them developing unhealthy relationships with food.

She said: "I am very concerned about these apps leading to eating disorders such as orthorexia or anxiety in pregnant women.

Lists of food to avoid may lead to women endlessly checking ingredients in their foods. The advice for women to be cautious to drink chamomile tea is ridiculous, chamomile tea

he cautions to drink chamomile tea is ridiculous, chamomile tea especially is soothing.”

Dr Abigail Easter, an expert on eating disorders during pregnancy, said lists of “foods to avoid” can be ‘very difficult’ and ‘confusing’ for pregnant women with a history of eating disorders and lead to anxieties.

“I have spoken to women with a history of eating disorders who find long lists of foods to avoid very difficult. They become confused by all the information, leading to anxieties,” she said.

“For such women it is really important to speak to a health expert before cutting out any foods from their diet or look at targeted information available to them.”

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Japan

Here, raw fish is seen as healthy, and the idea that pregnant women should give up sushi is laughable.

India

Some Indian families believe that eating saffron helps to produce a fair-complexion child, encouraging women to drink saffron milk. Although there is no scientific evidence to support this, the spice is good for digestion and has anti-inflammatory properties. Eating extremely spicy food is also encouraged.

China

Mothers-to-be are told to avoid cold foods such as ice-cream, while watermelon, bananas and mung beans are thought to contain a negative yin, or energy, that can result in a miscarriage.

France

Historically, French women have a more relaxed attitude to drinking alcohol and eating soft cheese while pregnant, even if the country's medical professionals disagree.

The apps, which have been downloaded thousands of times in Britain, target pregnant women and provide advice on “safe eating” during pregnancy, babies development, life-style during and after pregnancy and other information.

Some apps offer long lists of foods with safety advice.

But health experts have raised concerns about the reliability of nutritional advice included in the apps.

“We know that women in the UK are downloading pregnancy apps in large amounts and at that they are in widespread use,” said Angela Flynn Research Associate Department of Women and Children's Health at King's College London.

“Many of these apps include information on nutrition but there is concern about the scientific validity of the nutritional content spoken about in these apps because the apps haven't been evaluated to their scientific quality or the evidence.”

In numbers Eating disorders in the UK

A 2016 report commissioned by Beat estimated that:

- More than 725,000 people in the UK are affected by an eating disorder
- Around 1 in 250 women and 1 in 2,000 men will experience anorexia nervosa at some point
- Anorexia usually develops at around 16 or 17 years of age
- Bulimia is around two to three times more common than anorexia nervosa
- Around 90% of people with bulimia are female
- Binge eating is estimated to affect around 5% of the adult population

Whereas some of the more popular apps originate in the UK, the apps developed in countries such as the US could be giving nutritional advice that is different to UK standards, Dr Flynn said.

The NHS is currently developing an official list of quality approved health apps but for now only includes two pregnancy apps which do not offer food safety advice.

The Food Standards Authority cautioned against following the apps' advice, stating: "While there are a number of apps available offering advice about food during pregnancy, we would always recommend that expectant mothers follow the evidence-based general advice on the NHS Choices website.

"If pregnant mothers have specific conditions, they should contact their GP or midwife for advice."