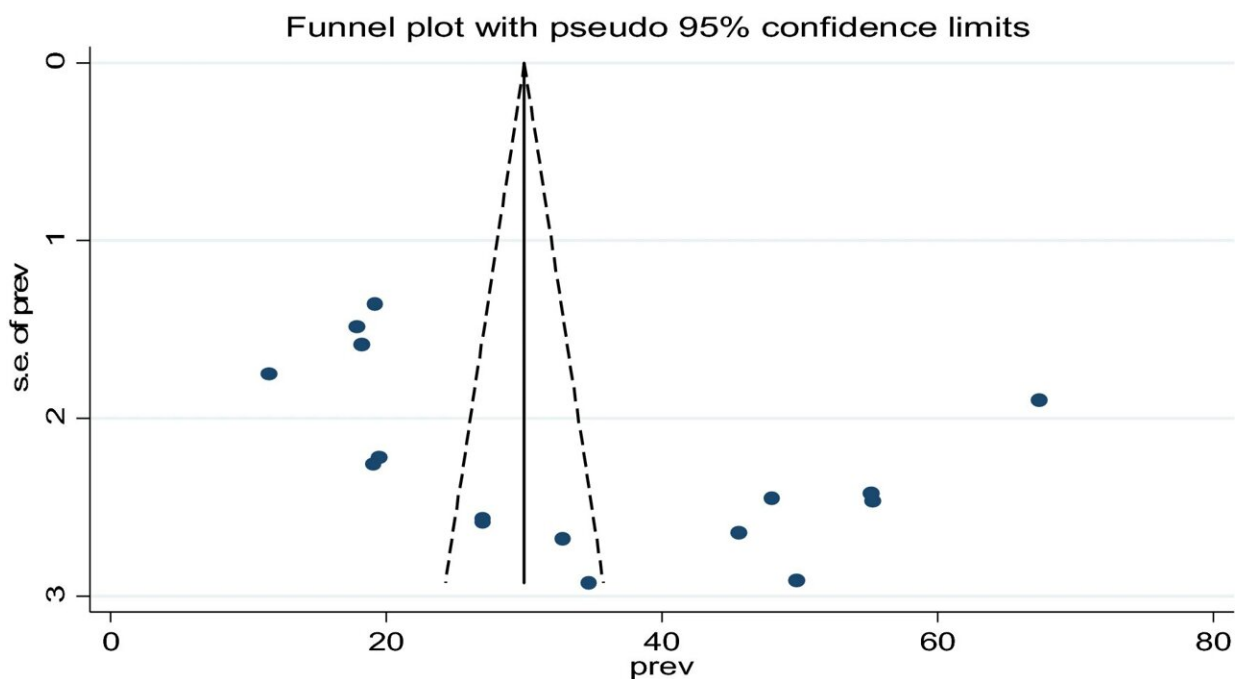


Food taboos causing malnutrition in pregnant women in Ethiopia, find public health researchers

April 19 2023, by Solomon Yimer



Funnel plot presented the visual inspection of publication bias for systematic review and meta-analysis of food taboo practices among pregnant women in Ethiopia, 2022. Credit: *Scientific Reports* (2023). DOI: 10.1038/s41598-023-30852-0

One in five pregnant women in Ethiopia are deliberating staying undernourished for fear of fetal deformities and giving birth to big babies,

public health researchers say.

Many pregnant mothers in Ethiopia are suffering from [nutritional deficiencies](#) during pregnancies due to harmful myths and [cultural beliefs](#), even though their nutritional needs increase during this period.

Food taboos are a set of proscriptions of certain foods or food combinations, and are prevalent—for different reasons such as cultural, spiritual or ethical—around the globe.

A taboo against certain foods, such as dairy products, fruits, vegetables, meat, and honey, can lead to nutrient deficiencies and malnutrition for both mothers and unborn children.

These practices can perpetuate a cycle of malnutrition and [poor health](#) in families, as children who experience malnutrition may suffer from long-term physical and cognitive deficits, researchers say.

Researchers, as part of the study published in *Scientific Reports*, systematically reviewed data from 16 separate studies to understand the prevalence of food taboos in Ethiopia.

"Our goal is to provide a more complete understanding on the prevalence of food taboos across the entire nation," Berhanu Gidisa Debela, lead author of the study told us.

Despite progress in [nutrition education](#), Debela, who is a public health specialist at College of Health and Medical Science, Dilla University, Ethiopia, says the study has shown that food taboos are still prevalent within the country's population.

Factors responsible for food taboos

The study found that having less than a secondary education level, having no antenatal care follow-up, and being a rural resident were found to be significant contributors to food taboos among pregnant women in Ethiopia.

According to Debela, [health workers](#) play a crucial role in detecting and managing the presence of these taboos, particularly during antenatal care follow-up. These assessments can help ensure that pregnant women have access to the necessary nutrients and support to improve maternal and child nutrition outcomes.

"It is crucial for pregnant women to receive education and guidance on proper nutrition and food choices during antenatal care visits," Debela told us.

As [rural women](#) are more susceptible to practice food taboos during pregnancy, expanding [health services](#) can also help these women access essential follow-up care and basic nutrition, ensuring healthy pregnancies and healthy babies, he adds.

Mercy Lung'aho, biomarker and anthropometry lead at the Nigerian National Food Consumption and Micronutrient Survey, International Institute for Tropical Agriculture, tells us that studying food cultures in Africa is crucial to addressing the unique nutritional challenges facing communities across the continent.

Food taboos can negatively impact the health of women and their families in several ways, she said.

"They may limit the intake of essential nutrients, leading to malnutrition, increased risk of complications during pregnancy, and poor fetal development," said Lung'aho, who was not involved in the research.

"This can contribute to low birth weight, stunted growth, and increased

risk of infant mortality."

While it is challenging to measure the precise impact of food taboos on malnutrition in Sub-Saharan Africa, these [cultural practices](#) do contribute to the issue, she says adding malnutrition is a multifaceted problem in the region, with food scarcity, poverty, and limited access to healthcare all playing significant roles.

"Tackling food taboos as part of a wider strategy can lead to improved health outcomes," Lung'aho said.

The researchers say addressing food taboos is necessary for promoting a healthy reproductive process for both mother and baby.

"The findings of this study can help policymakers, planners, and health service providers by generating and disseminating evidence-based information that can aid in the design and implementation of appropriate interventions," Lung'aho said.

Lung'aho told us that efforts to address food taboos and improve access to vital nutrients for [pregnant women](#) could include education and awareness campaigns, engaging religious and community leaders, developing culturally sensitive nutrition programs, and improving access to healthcare services like prenatal care and nutritional counseling.

More information: Berhanu Gidisa Debela et al, Food taboo practices and associated factors among pregnant women in Ethiopia: a systematic review and meta-analysis, *Scientific Reports* (2023). [DOI: 10.1038/s41598-023-30852-0](https://doi.org/10.1038/s41598-023-30852-0)

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