

Geophagic Practice in Vhembe District, Limpopo Province, South Africa

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ABSTRACT Earth materials are consumed by human beings for a wide variety of reasons, namely, for mineral nutrient supplementation, protection from toxins and for cultural norms. The aim of this study was to estimate the prevalence of geophagic practices, causative reasons for geophagy and types of earth material consumed by geophagists. The purposive sampling technique was used to identify 438 female geophagists (Earth eaters) in the Vhembe District in South Africa. Socio-economic features, causative reasons and benefits derived from the eating of earth materials were assessed using a self-administered questionnaire. Results indicated that forty-six percent of the women were married, forty-five percent were single, five percent were divorced and four percent were widows. They were mainly engaged in farming, wage labor, and petty trading, with very few of them in the civil service. The main reasons for geophagic practice among the women were for the soothing taste, quelling of nauseate feelings, and pleasant flavor. The preferred types of earth materials were soft stone (22%) and clay (34%). The mean daily intake of earth materials for pregnant women was 90g, while mean daily intake for non-pregnant women ranged from 40 to 60g. The study revealed high prevalence of geophagic practice amongst women of diverse ethnicities and different age groups in Vhembe District, South Africa.