



Pica in women in rural South Africa

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INTRODUCTION

Pica is defined as the persistent consumption of non-nutritive substances, such as soil or chalk, that is inappropriate for the person's developmental stage and severe enough to warrant clinical attention (ICD-11). Derived from the Latin word for magpie, it alludes to these non-discriminatory eating habits. Evidence of geophagia, the eating of soil, can be found in ancient writings by Hippocrates and Celsus, which discuss the link between anaemia and geophagia. It has also been found to be more common in Africa, in women (particularly pregnant women) and people with mental health conditions.

AIM

Tintswalo Hospital in eastern South Africa has approximately 400 beds and serves the surrounding rural population. Local markets sell packets of soil for people to consume.

The aim of this project was to determine what population of people ate soil, the nature of the soil they ate, where they acquired it from and their reasons for doing it and its relation to anaemia.

Market near Tintswalo Hospital selling packets of soil for people to consume alongside fruit and vegetables.



METHOD

A questionnaire was designed to investigate this further. 100 women attending a variety of outpatient clinics at Tintswalo Hospital in May 2019 completed the questionnaire. A nurse kindly translated their answers.

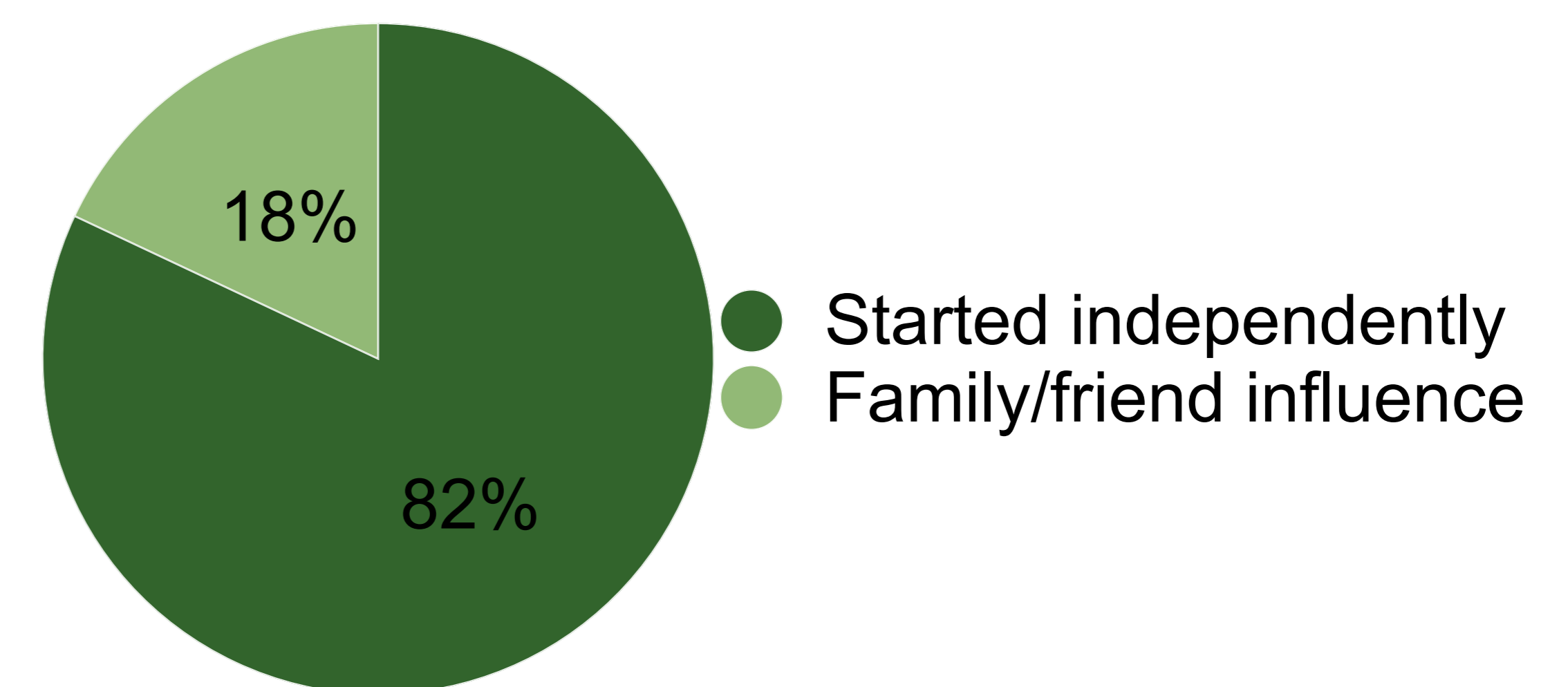
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RESULTS

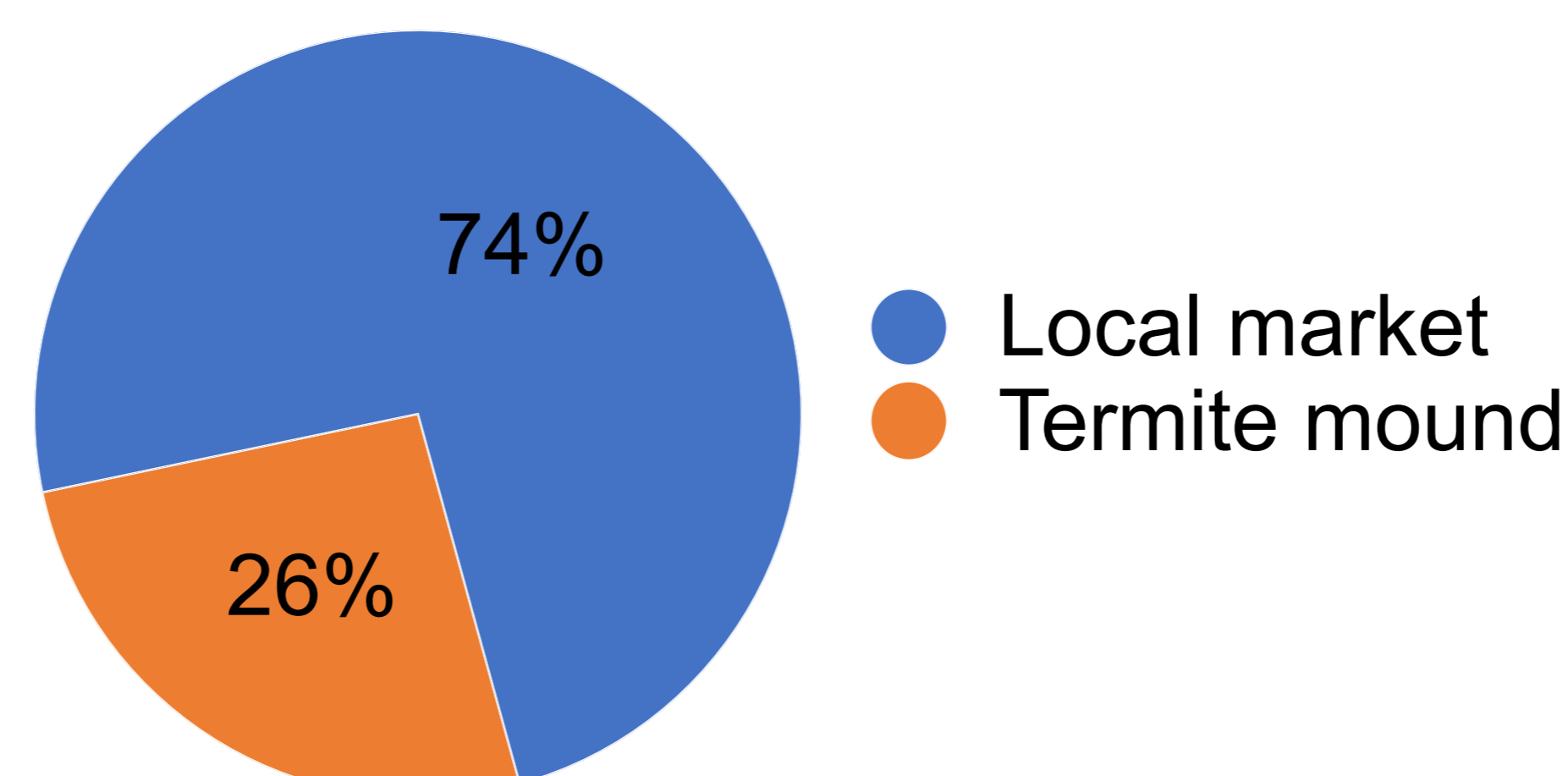
39% currently or previously consumed soil
41% ate soil during their pregnancy

Did they start eating soil independently?



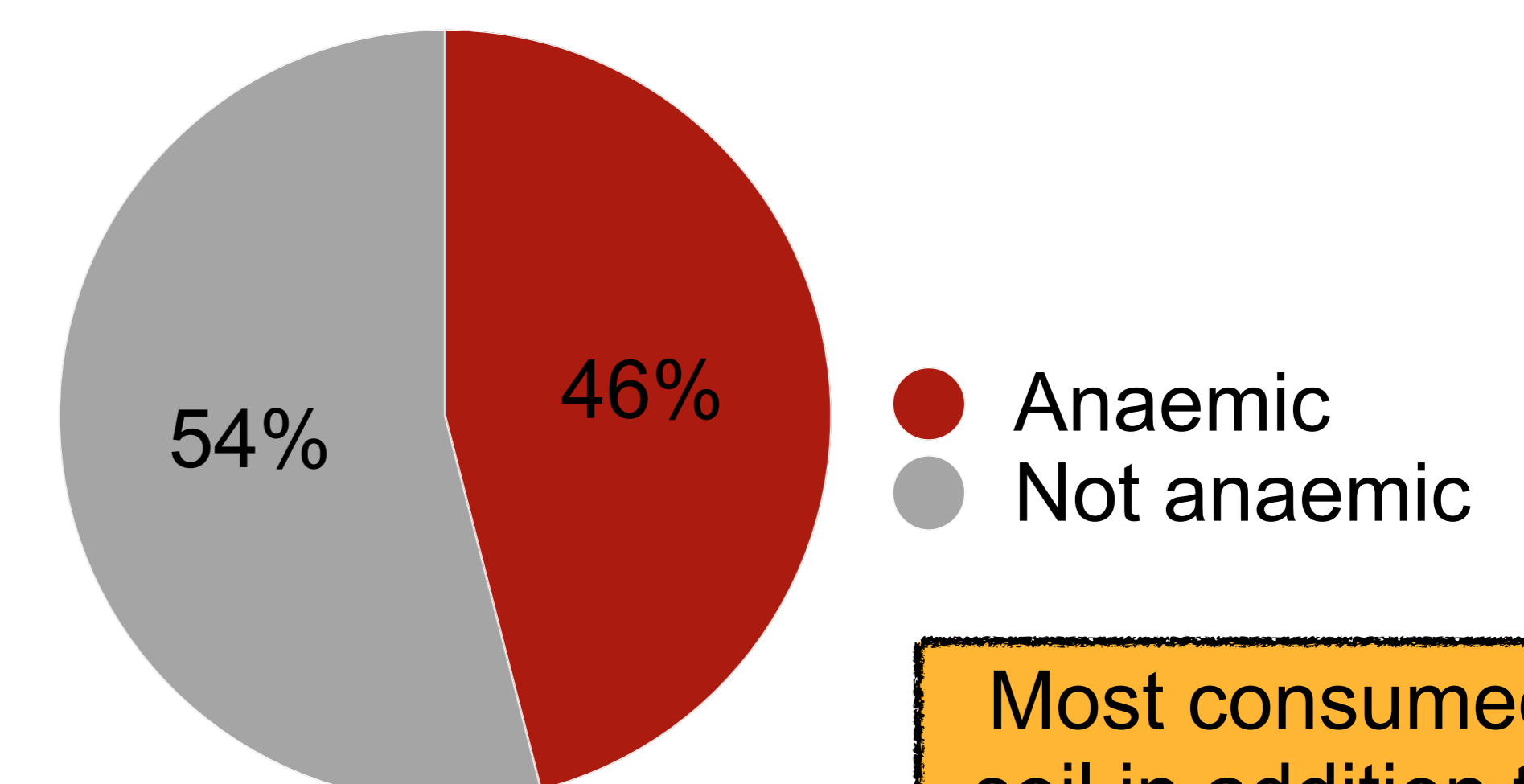
Most said they ate soil simply because they craved the taste. 12.5% said it helped their nausea or heartburn.

Where they acquired the soil from



Termite mounds have been shown to be much richer in certain minerals than the surrounding soil.

Link to anaemia



Most started consuming soil in their teenage years, when their periods began. Some women stopped eating soil once their anaemia was resolved.

Most consumed soil in addition to their regular meals and only ate a small amount once or less than once a day. This was presumed not to be enough to cause anaemia.

CONCLUSIONS

This project presents findings from a subset of women with pica in eastern South Africa. It highlights that nutritional deficiencies as well as the patient's personal and psychiatric history likely all tie together as causative factors for pica.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I would like to thank Dr McIntosh and Tintswalo Hospital for helping me facilitate this project as well as the BSH for making it possible.