

Postnatal Recovery

There is a long documented history in traditional Chinese medicine of women taking dietary remedies to encourage lactation and to promote their recovery from childbirth or a miscarriage.

Specific foods are seen to be especially valuable.

Foods that tonify Qi (energy)

This includes oats, rice, potato, sweet potato, pumpkin, mushroom (button and shitake), yam, date, grape, Kidney beans, tofu, beef, chicken, tuna, egg, jasmine tea and spices such as; basil, cinnamon, clove, dill, fennel, fenugreek, ginger, nutmeg, rosemary, thyme.

Examples of every day western foods that can be used to build Qi

- Oat porridge with dates
- Roast sweet potatoes, pumpkin and yams with rosemary
- Chicken stir fry with shiitake mushrooms and rice
- Shepherds pie with beef mince, mushrooms, carrots and mashed potato as a topping
- Peanut Satay sauce with chicken or meat on rice
- Potato and egg salad
- Tuna fish pie made with hard boiled eggs and served with mashed potatoes and peas
- Stir fired Tofu, eggplant and mushrooms with sesame seeds on rice
- Home made muesli slice with honey and dates

Foods to build Blood

This includes corn, sweet rice, beetroot, all dark leafy greens, mushroom, apricot, avocado, date, kidney bean, sesame seeds, chicken, mussels, egg and soya milk as well as the obvious iron rich foods such as red meat and spinach.

Examples of every day western foods that can be used to build Blood include

- Rice porridges with Soya milk, apricots and almonds
- Dark leafy green salads with avocado and grated beetroot
- Warm chicken salad with artichoke and grapes
- Chicken mushroom casserole served with rice
- Scrambled Eggs with parsley
- Chicken, avocado and watercress sandwiches
- Mussel Chowder with calamari
- Kidney bean and mushroom lasagne with a spinach salad
- Any red meat dish. (Note the maximum recommended intake of meat in traditional Chinese medicine is 2 –4 oz per serving, 3 –7 times a week).

Cooking methods are also an important consideration, as slowly or lightly cooked foods are seen as more nourishing and kinder to the digestive system. The vital difference between using raw oats in muesli and consuming oats cooked in porridge, or having a lettuce salad instead of stir cooked vegetables. This is the reason why soups (especially chicken), are considered so nourishing in those initial postnatal weeks.

While the ingredients from some of the traditional recipes are not automatically transferable to a western diet (soups consisting of black- bone chicken, pig trotters or Astragalus Root and pork liver are usually off-putting through description alone), there are others that are a pleasant way to nourish your body post birth.

Congees

A congee is traditional Chinese medicinal porridge made from rice or barley. It is seen as a powerful therapeutic food for strengthening digestion, boasting energy and aiding in the recovery from illness.

A basic congee can be made from using one cup of grain to 6- 9 cups of liquid (this can be water, vegetable or chicken stock, or milk for the sweet congees).

- If you are making smaller portions just for yourself you need to halve these quantities.
- The amount of liquid you use will determine the thickness of the porridge, which can be thick like oat porridge or watery like a soup, depending on your preference.
- Polished rice is usually used, however sweet (glutinous rice) can be used to give a sweeter tasting congee.

To prepare, simply rinse the grain thoroughly and place with the liquid in a slow cooker (crockpot) overnight on low heat. Or simmer in a heavy pot on a low heat for 4-6 hrs, stirring frequently.

If the ingredients are placed in the slow cooker overnight and left on a low setting the next day, this dish provides you with a nourishing snack that can be eaten throughout the day with no further effort.

To this basic recipe any combination of the following can be added to suit your individual tastes: fresh or dried fruits (such as apricots, red or black dates), spices (such as vanilla, cinnamon, cardamom, fresh ginger), meats (such as chicken pieces or pork bones), vegetables such as mushrooms and liquids (water, stock or for sweet congees cow's milk (soya, rice or nut milks can also used).

Suggestions include:

Sweet Congees

- Use sweet glutinous rice cooked with apricots or black dates and a little cinnamon for a warming Qi and Blood building congee
- Use sweet glutinous rice cooked with milk (full strength or diluted with water depending on your taste) with a whole vanilla pod and cinnamon to taste

Savoury Congees

- Add fresh Shiitake mushrooms cooked with a little garlic to a plain cooked rice congee, topping with freshly chopped spring onion for a warming savoury Qi and Blood building congee
- Grind 25 grams of black sesame seeds, add to the uncooked rice and cook as a normal congee to enhance the blood building properties of any congee
- Cook slices of chicken and ginger in a rice congee replacing the water with chicken stock and topping with spring onion for a variation on chicken soup
- Cook fresh figs with red dates and pork bones with rice for a nourishing congee to help build breast milk

Rest and Recovery time

The concept of adequate rest to ensure women completely recovered from childbirth is an important part of traditional Chinese medicine. It involves the idea that it will take women at least a month to fully recover from childbirth, an idea not necessarily widespread in Western society. Usually partners or relatives will endeavour to be around to help out after the birth for a week (two weeks if the women are really lucky), then, for most women its back to “normal”. It may be an appealing idea that “super mums” will be fit and ready for action within a week or two following birth, but this is not the reality for most women. While most will certainly cope (and be rewarded by plenty of verbal feedback on how well they are doing), several months later it is often hard to shake off the tiredness and exhaustion.

While 30 days (or even 100 days in some of the Chinese texts) of recovery time may initially sound a little excessive, it is in reality a reasonable time period if it is considered that this is needed to compensate for not only the birth but also the total experience of being pregnant for nine months. This is not a time for absolute bed rest but rather a time where physical rest is taken at every opportunity, exercise is appropriate (not an exhausting attempt to get back into shape), and attention is placed on a diet, as outlined above so that there is an emphasis on building blood and energy.

Ideally acupuncture treatment is also given once a week commencing from 2 weeks postpartum for a total of 3 weeks to promote stamina and an efficient recovery. Acupuncture can also be useful at this time to balance emotions, aid perineal healing and help with any breastfeeding problems.