

HEALTH

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TCM

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Postnatal care

New mothers need to pay special attention to their bodies. In traditional Chinese practice, after giving birth a woman stayed at home for about four weeks, usually with a *pui yuet* (confinement maid) to take care of her and the baby.

This was believed to help her body return to its pre-pregnancy state, making her less likely to develop health problems such as depression, back pain, headaches and premature ageing.

A postnatal woman had to follow strict abstentions over this period. She had to stay indoors with windows and doors shut, and no visitors were allowed. She couldn't take baths, wash her hair or drink water, but she could have soups. She would stay in bed most of the time and was fed nutritious foods.

These rules may sound ridiculous to modern women, but they were designed to protect against evil invasion and subsequent illnesses. It also allowed the new mother time to rest and heal.

A new mother generally develops spontaneous sweating, constipation, urinary difficulty, chills and sensitivity to hot and windy weather.

Traditional Chinese medicine says these symptoms are caused by blood and *chi* deficiencies, which let the yang chi float to the body surface. From a modern TCM viewpoint, new mothers are fragile, depleted and susceptible to colds, arthritis, joint pains and diarrhoea due to environmental pathogens or evils such as wind, coldness and damp.

Physical work, social activities and long baths don't favour pelvic recovery and should also be avoided in TCM theory.

Diet is particularly vital to rebuild strength, according to TCM. Cold or raw foods and drinks are avoided as they're said to weaken the functions of absorption and digestion, and can bring on a cold imbalance. This is

why, after delivery, a woman is offered warm water over cold.

Easily digested foods with warm properties are favoured. Consuming semi-solid forms for the first few days is even better.

Foods that have warming properties are seen to promote blood and qi circulation.

These include chicken, beef, mutton, ham, shrimp, fish, eel, egg, leeks, beans, walnuts, sesame, cherries, chestnuts, chives, grapes, guava, kumquats, leaf mustard, lychees, longan, peaches, raspberries, rosemary, spearmint, sweet basil, nutmeg, cinnamon, clove, caraway, fennel, garlic, ginger, tangerine peel, brown sugar, vinegar, and wine.

A Cantonese custom is to treat with ginger stews. Large amounts

of ginger are simmered with sweet vinegar for about three to four hours to make a sauce, which is then used to stew pig's feet and eggs. This nutritious dish, which can be found commercially in supermarkets, provides plenty of protein, enhances spleen function and arrests sweating. Ginger is routinely included in everyday cooking and made into a decoction for warm bathing.

Additionally, a soup made from carp can help promote a new mother's breast milk supply. After boiling the fish for an hour, add tofu, ginger and salt to taste. The soup looks milky.

Before taking any medicine, consult your TCM or medical practitioner.