

Pregnancy and postnatal recovery

The Mother-Child Law

The Mother-Child Law in Chinese medicine says that the health of the mother determines the health of the child. This means that the best way to look after your baby is to look after yourself.

Ancient Chinese texts have emphasised the value of wellbeing in pregnancy since the Han Dynasty (206 BC – 220 AD):

“A pregnant woman carries with her the finest piece of jade. She should enjoy all things, look at fine pictures and be attended by handsome servants.” - Admonitions to Women

During pregnancy

Diet

Going easy on your digestion helps your body extract the nutrients needed for your growing baby, to produce energy for labour, and for physical recovery after giving birth. During pregnancy, avoid spice, pungent flavours, grease, sugar and dairy. Instead, eat lots of cooked vegetables, grains, soups and stews.

Physical activity

Build your stamina throughout your pregnancy with gentle exercise like swimming, walking, tai chi or pregnancy yoga. Rest as soon as you feel tired and store your energy by having a set downtime every day.

Emotional wellbeing

Emotional wellbeing is as important as physical health, so look after your emotions as carefully as you look after your body. During pregnancy, don't dismiss your feelings as “just hormonal”. Instead, pay attention to what upsets you and avoid upsetting things like sad films / books, upsetting news reports, and so on.

Pregnancy massage, meditation, relaxation tapes, soothing music and avoiding caffeine can all help with insomnia, anxiety and depression. If you feel depressed, take a 30-minute walk outdoors every day and make a regular effort to do something creative. If you feel anxious, do quiet activities that keep your hands busy, like knitting, sewing or drawing.

When to have acupuncture

Acupuncture gives your body the instructions it needs to cope better with the physiological changes in pregnancy. It is worth considering acupuncture if you have problems with:

- Anxiety and depression
- Carpal tunnel syndrome
- Constipation
- Haemorrhoids
- Heartburn
- Insomnia
- Itching
- Leg cramps
- PSD
- Recurrent urinary tract infections
- Rib, back and neck pain
- Sinusitis
- Tiredness
- Uterine bleeding
- Varicose veins
- Vulval varicosities

Self-help for physical problems

There are many things you can do at home to help with the most common problems in pregnancy.

Everyone experiences some discomfort in pregnancy. However, just because its 'normal' doesn't mean you should put up with it.

Constipation

- Drink 6-8 glasses of warm or room temperature water daily
- Eat loads of fruit including dried fruits like apricots, figs, prunes and raisins. Also eat sunflower seeds, nuts and linseeds
- Have a cup of hot prune juice or lemon juice in hot water half an hour before each meal
- Take a gentle half-hour walk every day
- If your GP has prescribed iron tablets, speak to them about changing your prescription if constipation becomes a problem

Haemorrhoids

- Avoid constipation (see above)
- Avoid bran and high fibre foods, as these can aggravate haemorrhoids
- Take 2-3 warm baths daily, for 20-30 minutes each and add Cypress oil or Epsom salts to the bath water
- Apply Witch Hazel to the area
- Rest a lot, lying on your left side
- Avoid standing or sitting for long periods

Varicose veins

- Sit or lie with your legs elevated and don't cross your legs or ankles
- Rotate your ankles five times in each direction whenever you sit down
- Wear medical support stockings. Put them on before getting out of bed in the morning and take them off before going to bed at night

Itching

- Have lukewarm instead of hot showers and baths
- Avoid spicy food, chocolate and coffee
- Try to avoid perfumed cosmetics, soaps and deodorants
- Wear loose-fitting clothes made of natural fibres
- Apply Aloe Vera lotion to itchy skin and use Calendula cream for sore nipples

Sinusitis

- Eat pears and grapefruit
- Drink grapefruit juice and peppermint tea
- Avoid cows' dairy, pork, rich meats, roasted peanuts, orange and tomato juice, bananas, sugar and artificial sweeteners, and fried food

Preparing for childbirth

Pre-birth acupuncture, given from around 34 weeks, helps both mum and baby prepare for the birthing process.

Acupressure during labour

If you wish, your pre-birth acupuncture sessions can include lessons for you and your birth partner in how to use acupressure during labour. Acupressure during labour can help to control pain and speed up labour, and it helps you to feel calmer during labour. It can also be a wonderful way for your birth partner to be involved in the birthing process.

Turning a breach baby

Acupuncture and moxibustion (where acupuncture points are warmed using a traditional herb) can help to turn a baby in breech position at 34 or 35 weeks' pregnant. Many babies will turn after this date, but research has shown that around 30% more will turn with this treatment.

Natural labour induction

There are several acupuncture points that encourage the onset of natural labour. Acupuncture induction treatments can be given from 40 weeks' pregnant. Only 1 or 2 treatments are required, with labour usually starting within 48 hours of treatment. You will also be shown how to use acupressure at home to continue the effect of the acupuncture after your treatment session.

The postnatal period

'Doing the month'

In China, new mothers are encouraged to 'do the month'. This means spending the first 30 days after giving birth doing only what baby does (eating, 'evacuating' and sleeping). Traditionally, family and friends do everything for the new mother, from housework to cooking her meals. According to Chinese medicine, 'doing the month' avoids later problems like depression, anxiety, fatigue, joint pain, infections, ageing skin, greying hair, breaking nails and loose teeth.

While 'doing the month' is not so straightforward in Western culture today, there are some ways in which you can make things easier for yourself in the first weeks at home with your new baby.

Emotional wellbeing

Trust yourself. Remember that you are the best qualified person to be your baby's mum. Babies cry. Don't panic. Just cuddle or take a break if you need to. Accept that life has changed and go with the flow – and keep reminding yourself that it will get easier!

When to have acupuncture

From around **34 weeks** to prepare your body for the birthing process, and to learn how to use acupressure during labour

At **34 – 35 weeks** if your baby is in the breach position

From **40 weeks** to encourage the onset of natural labour

When to have acupuncture

It is worth considering acupuncture if you have:

- postnatal depression and anxiety
- persistent uterine bleeding
- after pains
- night sweats
- insufficient breast milk
- mastitis

Acupuncture can also help to restore normal sensation around a C-section scar from 6 weeks to several years after the procedure.

Surround yourself with positive, supportive people and accept all offers of help! Other new mums can be a wonderful source of emotional support, and having an 'emergency parent' to call on when you feel like you're losing it can make all the difference. Negative and pushy people have no place in your life after giving birth, so if you're not used to saying "no", start practicing now.

Getting sleep

Getting anywhere near enough sleep will be one of your biggest challenges. Here are some suggestions that may help:

- Sleep whenever baby sleeps
- Agree with your partner to take turns sleeping or sleep in shifts
- Put the cot next to the bed or get a co-sleeping cot
- Get a bottle warmer with a cooling compartment (e.g. First Years Night and Day Bottle Warmer)

Eating

- Stock the freezer with ready meals
- Have meals delivered
- Set up online grocery delivery from a supermarket
- Get takeaways delivered
- Tell any visitors to bring ready-to-eat food

Rest is more important than eating all the right things, so follow the dietary advice below only if you have the energy to put it into practice:

- Drink lots of water
- Eat warm, cooked food. Soups and stews are best
- Avoid caffeine, as a lot of it can make a breastfeeding baby irritable
- Foods that help your body recover after giving birth include apricot, avocado, basil, beetroot, chicken, cinnamon, clove, dark leafy greens, dates, dill, egg, fennel, fenugreek, ginger, jasmine tea, kidney beans, mushrooms, nutmeg, oats, potato, red meat, rice, rosemary, sesame seeds, spinach, sweet potato, thyme, yam

Housework and laundry

- Get a microwave bottle steriliser
- Hire a temporary cleaner / cleaning service
- Send baby and grandma to the Laundromat while you sleep
- Buy extra underwear, socks and pyjamas
- Avoid dishes with disposable plates, cups and cutlery

"I went to bed really early and resumed duty when I woke up at 2-3am. He stayed up late and went to bed at about 2am. I expressed milk to cover his shift." – Honore, a new mother

"It isn't just the effort of cooking you want to save yourself during those first few weeks. It's the effort of even thinking about cooking." – Arthur, a new father

"I asked my sister to be my laundry service for a month." – Thandi, a new mother