

Ancient Wisdom for Modern Mothers

By Sonya Bastow, CPPAD

According to Ayurvedic medicine, choices made the first 42 days after birth influence a woman's health and ability to mother and partner for the next 42 years. India and many older countries, such as China, Columbia, and Japan, all have similar ways of treating a mother postpartum and they recognize the mother's invisible work that goes on after giving birth. In the United States the maternal physiological needs during postpartum are often ignored; the focus tends to be more on the external and baby's needs. Many women feel it is a sign of accomplishment to get back to 'normal life' as soon as possible and aren't encouraged to take it easy, this can lead to many health problems immediately or later in life.

Ayurvedic postpartum treatment uses a specialized approach of postpartum care for mothers and babies. This approach comes from Ayurveda, a 5,000 year old medical system developed in India. Ayurveda means life knowledge and is based on keeping the body in balance through foods, herbs, yoga, breathing, and lifestyle.

Ayurveda believes that there are three main metabolic principles called doshas which make up a person's constitution, and are also active in times of life such as childhood, childbearing, menopause, old age, as well as in the seasons. These three doshas are termed Vata, Pitta, and Kapha. They are made up of, what the ancients in many cultures called, the elements; earth, water, fire, and air. Vata is the air and space element; it is dry, hard, and cold. Pitta is fire and water; it is hot and wet. Kapha is earth and water; it is grounded, wet, slow, and thick. Each of us has some of each dosha, which makes up our constitution. Usually one or two of the elements are dominant in an individual, but some people have a balance of all three. When a person has one or more doshas out of balance, Ayurveda treats the individual for those doshas to achieve balance.

Very often a mother who has recently delivered has problems with anxiety, insecurity, dryness, constipation, gas, digestion, and sleep, which are all Vata complications. According to Ayurveda, after child birth a person is treated for a Vata imbalance. In Ayurvedic postpartum care, women are treated with warmth, wetness and oiliness as part of their therapy. The ways in which they receive this treatment is through food preparation, keeping the home warmer, moisture, rest, and receiving daily peaceful massage with warm oil. Food preparation is a crucial element to the Ayurvedic method of postpartum care. After childbirth a woman's digestive fire is weakened and needs to be rekindled and nurtured. Ayurveda focuses on foods that are warm, wet, oily, and have sweet, sour and salty tastes, to bring vata back into balance. Sweet does not mean candy and refined sugars, but instead foods such as yams, honey, iron rich sugars, basmati rice, and fresh fruits.

The foods chosen are also important, by avoiding or minimizing food that increase digestive discomfort in the mom and baby, and encouraging food that is defined to help rejuvenation and lactation. Eating food that is freshly made is highly recommended. Fresh meals have more life force; they have the most nutrition, life and digestive support. Eating leftovers is discouraged in the Ayurvedic practice.

Food that is cold and food that takes water from the body is hard to digest. Examples are water with ice (warm water or room temp is better), raw vegetables, ice cream, salads, heavy meats, and

food that are straight out of the refrigerator. Even if a mom has constipation it is recommended that she does not eat salads. Often a salad is what people often think of eating for constipation but, it can create gas in both mother and baby, takes more water from the body to be able to digest, and can actually cause more constipation. The same holds true for bulking agents, crackers, toast and dried fruits that are not soaked first. Ayurvedic care uses extra oiliness and fluids to help keep things moving in the bowels. This is achieved through consumption of weak warm teas, the generous use of clarified butter called ghee, and eating fresh and stewed fruits. Sipping warm liquids is also helpful, as is adding a teaspoon of ghee to a hot milk tonic to drink before bed. Other foods to minimize, which can cause gas and other digestive complaints with mom or baby, are onions, those in the cabbage family, raw garlic, fermented foods, leavenings, hard cheeses, tomatoes, and carbonated beverages.

There are many foods that support the mother's digestion, restoration, and lactation. Dried fruits and nuts are great if they are soaked over night; the soaking of nuts releases the enzyme inhibitors in them. Almonds should have the skin removed since it is hard on the liver according to Ayurveda and they taste better if peeled and toasted in the oven until golden in color. Proteins that are helpful include mung beans, red lentils, nut butters, nuts, poultry, and fish. Poultry and fish are best cooked with extra moisture to avoid taking moisture out of the body during digestion. Recommended carbohydrates are cream of rice or wheat, yams, potatoes, flour tortillas, oats, basmati rice, and other grains. Fruits should be fresh and sweet; lime and lemon squeezes can be used on foods for a sour taste. Vegetables such as beets, carrots, asparagus, green beans, squashes, and greens, should be well cooked. Other beneficial foods include ghee, olive oil, sesame oil, ricotta cheese, cottage cheese, fresh mozzarella, yogurt, avocado, soups, and stews.

There are certain herbs and spices that are used in Ayurveda that enhance lactation and help with digestion. Garlic is a major postpartum kitchen medicine if it is roasted well with oil or ghee until it is browned, not raw or lightly cooked. It supports digestive, immune, and nervous systems and strong lactation. Other spices enhancing lactation are saffron, fennel, dill, basil, caraway and fenugreek. Spices that help relieve gas and aid digestion include cinnamon, cardamom, cumin, ginger, garlic, and fennel. Basil, oregano, thyme, marjoram, tarragon, nutmeg, turmeric, and coriander all have digestive and other beneficial qualities too.

Ayurvedic care also includes four safe herbal preparations for mothers (if they desire them) that enhance lactation, tissue repair, cell regeneration, and digestion. Sweet Water Lactation Tea is made with fennel and fenugreek. The name says it all; this tea enhances breast milk production and is a helpful digestive aid. Almond Herbal Snack also known as Stanya Rasayana is great for connective tissues and lactation; it has almonds, edible gum, coconut, sucanat, cardamom, nutmeg and ginger. Savory Digestive Herbs have ingredients that help with digestion like fennel, ginger, licorice, black salt, and sesame seeds. Dashmool is a ten root formula which supports cell rejuvenation.

Warm oil massages, termed abhyanga is a type of massage that is practiced in Ayurvedic care for mothers. The massage is specifically designed for postpartum. It is not a deep tissue massage, which often promotes heavier bleeding, but instead a very relaxing soothing repetitive 90-minute home spa treatment protocol. Ideally the mother would have a daily abhyanga, but even once a week can be beneficial. Mothers are instructed in a simple self massage for the days she cannot receive the full care. The abhyanga helps the body to move stored up wastes out of the tissues and

muscles which is very important during the time when the mother is not as active. It also promotes deep peacefulness and generous lactation. Repeated massages are cumulative in the body and mind, each time a mother receives one the results make a deeper impression in her cell memory and greater benefits are achieved.

Infant massage is an Ayurvedic protocol for babies. It is conducted in a nice warm environment, usually the bathroom where a warm bath can be drawn for the baby afterwards. Like the mother's, it is an oily massage, although for baby it only takes about 15 minutes. Infant massage helps to create bonding with the parents and is great for gassy, fussy, anxious, constipated, and restless babies. This massage is taught to parents by trained Ayurvedic postpartum doulas. Aside from massage and through foods, there is another way for mothers to get their oil, if they wish, through the use of basti which is a warm oil enema. The oil is cooked down with water and nourishing herbs are added for the digestive tract and nervous system.

Some mothers complain of feeling like their bellies are flopping all over and everything is moving around. Ayurveda addresses this problem with belly wrapping, a traditional technique that helps the body to fill in the empty spaces and restore the organs and muscles to their appropriate places. A long piece of cloth, muslin or cotton (something comfortable), is wrapped around the abdomen a few times and pulled snug, but not too tight. There are belly wraps made commercially as well many women prefer to use these.

A primary concern for mothers is avoiding postpartum depression and colic. Following the protocols mentioned above, and beginning them immediately after giving birth, may reduce the risk of developing these problems. The Ayurvedic approach also uses essential oils to help with these issues, upon consent of the mother. Therapeutic grade essential oils, such as those sold by Young Living, are pure grown and chemical free. There are different blends of oils that can be helpful for postpartum mood, hormonal, and claming support. It is necessary to be trained or have some knowledge in the use of essential oils.

Other complications that may arise during the postpartum period are often affected by a mother's constitution. Dietary modifications, herbs, lifestyle adjustments and extra support are encouraged by Ayurveda to help restore the imbalance. The time of year, the lifecycle a woman is in, and the geographical location one lives could also influence an imbalance. For example Colorado is a very Pitta and Vata increasing climate so one may need to address these factors as well for treatment. The care mothers and babies receive following birth greatly influences their wellbeing for years to come. By promoting a balanced approach to postpartum care, through food preparation, nutritional consultation, massage, and family support, Ayurveda can help facilitate awareness and provide a healthy start to this important transition in life.

Sonya Bastow is a certified Postpartum AyurDoula (Ayurvedic doula) from the Rocky Mountain Institute of Yoga and Ayurveda. She has been studying Ayurveda and working with families in the Boulder area as a postpartum AyurDoula for the past 6+ years. Sonya can be contacted at 303-619-5326 or sonya@mettadoula.com

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