

POSTPARTUM CARE:
THE BRIDGE THAT SUSTAINS AND SUPPORTS US AS OUR FAMILIES GROW

By Amy E. Mager, DACM, LAc

Postpartum, that most magical and sometimes overwhelming time right after giving birth, can be as pregnant with excitement as birth itself. Postpartum is celebrated, cherished, and protected around the world. In China, India, and the Philippines, new mothers are cooked for, cared for, and nourished by mothers, mothers-in-law, and other family members.¹

In our "advanced" industrial society, this often does not happen. Extended family is frequently not around, so the new mother is left to fend for herself and her baby. In my practice, women often express feeling the societal expectation to be "super mom". In this impossible situation, the new mom will somehow manage to nurse while keeping her house immaculate and do craft projects with older kids, while also keeping to the theoretical family schedule developed before the new addition. Some have worked until the birth and don't realize how changes like recovering from the birth and sleepless nights can drastically affect one's activities. These prevailing attitudes leave postpartum women feeling the pressure to continuously do more. This is a time, however, when the utmost priority is integrating the gift of new life into one's growing family, not maintaining the previous status quo of individual family needs without sacrifice. It can be overwhelming to take care of yourself, the new baby, and sometimes even other children—not to mention household labor! So how do we, as women and mothers, make a smooth transition from life before the baby to the hectic, vulnerable state of postpartum?

"For every day a woman doesn't take care of herself in the first two weeks postpartum, she adds a month to her postpartum recovery." Dr. Raven Lang, my teacher, midwife for twenty years, and an acupuncturist, shared this sage wisdom with patients and with me. Just yesterday, I was working with a new mom who felt relatively well. Wanting to do everything she had done before the baby was born, however, she chose not to rest while her two-week-old baby was sleeping. We spoke of the importance of doing less and being more. When we worked together, she checked in with her body and realized that she had been undergoing unnoticed changes—a message from her body that she needed to give herself more attention and get more rest. There are some women who do bounce back quickly, but that is not a realistic goal for everyone; we come to birth with our own histories and our own needs, and out of it with our own unique experiences. This is a sacred time to be gentle with yourself and listen to your needs as well as those of your precious one.

When women bleed and give birth, they lose heat and essence, also known as jing or life energy. During the postpartum period, we need to focus on getting and maintaining warmth. In most parts of the world, “mother roasting” fulfills this need by deeply warming the mother after birth. In the Philippines and India, that might mean filling a pit with rocks, building a fire in the pit, then layering moss and other material over the fire, over which the mother then lays. In China and the U.S., acupuncture and moxibustion treatments (a Chinese medical technique to generate a deep, healing heat) are ideal, hot water bottles sufficing if moxa is unavailable. Immediately or as soon as possible postpartum, moxibustion treatments (and acupuncture and herbal medicine, if appropriate) speed the involution (return to normal size) of the uterus, promoting and building your energy so that you are available to yourself and your loved ones.² Use local resources to line up support in advance for doula services, breastfeeding assistance, postpartum help, and a meal train. Take a breastfeeding class before your baby is born. Consider attending a La Leche League meeting. Seek out a nursing pillow that supports the baby and brings a newborn to the perfect height for nursing. We always want to bring our babies to the breast rather than the breast to the baby. Nursing stools align your body and raise your knees, making it easier to be in the best position to nurse. Remember: good habits and good positioning in the beginning will help both you and your baby establish a successful breastfeeding relationship. Find a group or store to try on different options for wearing your baby to see if a sling, wrap, or structured carrier works best for you.

For friends who want to help, let them cook meals for you either to be eaten right away or frozen until you need them. Please ask those who make meals to bring them in recyclable containers and not their favorite ceramic piece that Aunt Sally gave them for their wedding. Remember that some babies do get colicky if you eat broccoli, cauliflower, spinach, kale, beans, or uncooked onions. Some babies don't like soy and some don't tolerate dairy, but this is only temporary; as your baby grows, he or she will tolerate many different kinds of foods. Ask the friends who bring meals to plan only a short visit because you may need to rest. Some find it helpful to have a list of tasks on the fridge that would be helpful to any visitors.

If you notice an increase in lochia (afterbirth flow) after resuming more activity, remember to slow down! If you heed this first sign of doing too much, your body won't have to give you another one—your bleeding will slow down again. Progressive signs can include fatigue, insomnia, and mastitis. “Mastitis is a breast infection, and you get it from doing too much,” said Dr. Raven Lang in many patient rooms. Your breasts are your barometer. Mastitis is uncomfortable, debilitating, and requires a timely recovery. Some women describe it as feeling like a war is going on inside their bodies. This is avoidable!

Make choices that support you to stay warm and healthy. Let helpers help. “Thank you” is a crucial phrase postpartum, especially for women who do too much. Whether it's shopping, doing dishes, laundry, or reading a story to an older sibling, get the support

you need after birth. The now famous author and television personality Dr. Penelope Leach learned this the hard way. After her first birth, her mother-in-law came to care of her, but what happened instead was her mother-in-law taking care of her baby while Dr. Leach scrubbed the floor. She was left exhausted, ill, and unable to do what she really wanted: to take care of and bond with her new baby.

Food choices are integral to maintaining warmth. If your body is an ATM, eating anything cold is an automatic withdrawal of energy. Your body has to use energy to digest the food. If you eat something warm, you are putting money in the bank. This is why soup is always served first in Chinese restaurants; when you eat something warm first, you aid your digestion. For the same reason, Chinese salads are marinated; marinating any food in vinegar warms its nature. Warm or room-temperature foods aid in postpartum recovery. Know how foods affect you and make choices that are healing for you.

Seemingly small things become very important postpartum. Make sure you are drinking enough water. Every time you nurse, drink an eight-ounce glass of water. Ask your partner (or an older child who wants to help) to keep a full glass or pitcher always within reach when you are breastfeeding.

Remember, a new mother has just completed her own personal physical, emotional, and psychological marathon, and will have her hands full recovering from birth, learning to breastfeed, and meeting a tiny new person's many needs. Take good care of yourself: it's an investment in your future, your family's future, the happiness of your family, and in modeling self-care for your children. When Mom is happy and healthy, everything flows more easily. The well-known corollary is that "when mama ain't happy, ain't nobody happy".

Chinese herbal medicine, acupuncture, and chiropractic care are invaluable for postpartum recovery and helping you regain the vital energy you expend nursing, nurturing, and caring for your loved ones. Investing in and caring for your new family will allow you to engage in the all-important task of baby-gazing.

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1: Lim, R. (1992) *After the Baby's Birth...A Woman's Way to Wellness: A Complete Guide for Postpartum Women*. Emeryville, CA: Ten Speed Press.

2: Lang, R.(1972) *Birth Book*. Santa Cruz, CA: Self Published.