

Postnatal Recovery

There is a long documented history in traditional Chinese medicine of women using diet to encourage lactation and recovery from childbirth or a miscarriage. This was seen as very important for ensuring future fertility and for women to provide future care for their families. Termed the 'Golden month' this was a time of resting and consuming specific foods to aid recovery. While 30 days of recovery time may initially sound a little excessive, it was considered essential 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 a diet that focuses on building blood and energy. From a Chinese medicine perspective slowly or lightly cooked foods are seen as more nourishing as they required less energy to digest. Therefore oats cooked in porridge are viewed as more beneficial than raw oats in muesli. For this reason soups (especially chicken), are considered especially nourishing in those initial postnatal weeks. While some traditional Chinese recipes contain ingredients that are not automatically transferable to a western diet (for example the use of pig trotters or pork liver), Congees are an easy convenient way to nourish your body post birth.

Congees

A congee is traditional Chinese medicinal porridge made from rice. 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 ½ cup of rice to 3 cups of liquid.

- This liquid can be water for a very plain congee, milk or nut milks (soya milk /rice milk or almond milk) for a sweet rice pudding type of congee, or you can use vegetable or chicken stock for a savoury congee. You may also prefer to use a ½ water ½ milk /stock mixture depending on your taste preferences.
- 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, simply adjust the amount of liquid depending on your preference.
- Polished rice is usually the grain used however sweet (glutinous rice) can be used to give a sweeter tasting congee. You can also use Arboria (risotto) rice or another grain such as barley for the savoury congee

To prepare, simply rinse the rice thoroughly and place with the liquid in a slow cooker overnight on low heat. By placing your ingredients in the slow cooker overnight you wake up to a nourishing snack that can be eaten throughout the day with no further effort.

If you wish to cook in a pot or oven it will need to be prepared on a low heat for several hours.

To this basic recipe any combination of the following can be added to suit your individual tastes.

Sweet Congees

- Add fresh or dried fruits such as apricots, figs, red or black dates
- Add spices such cinnamon, cardamom or vanilla
- For a creamy congee you can use Arborio rice with coconut milk (full strength or diluted with water depending on your taste) with a whole vanilla pod and cinnamon to taste

Savoury Congees

- Add meat on the bone (for example chicken pieces or pork bones) to cook through and add flavour
- Add fresh Shiitake mushrooms cooked with a little garlic, topping with freshly chopped spring onion when cooked
- For a variation on chicken soup add chicken bones and ginger with chicken or vegetable stock
- For a nourishing congee to help build breast milk add fresh figs with red dates and pork bones with stock for a nourishing congee to help build breast milk

Acupuncture and Moxibustion

Moxa is made from the leaves of a plant (*Artemisia argyi*) and used in traditional Chinese medicine to stimulate acupuncture points through heat. It can be used to aid postnatal recovery by using a moxa stick to warm points over your abdomen following childbirth. This is usually commenced 3 – 4 days following childbirth and used as needed for the first two weeks. Feedback from Midwives here in New Zealand suggests it can be helpful to build breast milk supply and in the healing of cesarean section scars. Please consult your acupuncturist for further details about how you could use this treatment yourself at home after having your baby.

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.

Compiled by Debra Betts author of "The essential guide to Acupuncture in Pregnancy and Childbirth" © 2006
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