

Birth Care & Family Health Services

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Helpful Herbs for New Moms *Adapted from natural health expert Aviva Jill Romm*

Herbs and healthy foods can help ease the stress of the postpartum period

- **Milky oats** (*Avena sativa*). These make a nourishing tonic for the nervous system. Oats themselves have long been used as a healthful food for mothers and children — they're very high in vitamins and minerals. Oats also are known to provide vigor and energy to horses. In the form of a tincture of the fresh, milky seeds of the plant, a new mother can take oats over a long period, even many months, to provide gentle calming effects. *Dose: to 1 teaspoon tincture one to three times daily.*

- **Nettle** (*Urtica dioica*). This herb is particularly nutritive, containing trace minerals and vitamins, especially iron, potassium and silica. The herb is used to treat anemia and weakness and to stabilize blood sugar. It's especially called for if you're feeling stressed or physically or emotionally drained. Nettle tea is delicious alone or in combination with other herbs, such as alfalfa (*Medicago sativa*) or spearmint. *Dose: 1 to 3 cups tea daily. Prepare by steeping 1/2 ounce dried herb per 2 cups boiling water for 30 minutes.*

- **Red raspberry leaf** (*Rubus idaeus*). Known mostly as a prenatal tonic, this actually is a general nutritive herb that makes an excellent tea. It's rich in minerals, tones the uterus and is a pleasant addition to teas. Combines well with nettles, mint, rose hips and many other beverage herbs. *Dose: Same as nettle.*

Stress and Tension Relievers:

- **Catnip** (*Nepeta cataria*). This herb's gentle but reliable relaxing qualities make it appropriate for new mothers, and these qualities, much as with chamomile, lavender and other aromatic herbs, are imparted to the baby, helping reduce colic and fussiness. Its mild taste enhances a tea, but it's also effective in tincture form. *Dose: 1 to 4 cups tea or 1/2 to 1 teaspoon tincture three to four times daily. Prepare by steeping 1 tablespoon dried herb in 1 cup boiling water for 10 minutes.*

- **Chamomile** (*Matricaria recutita*). This herb relaxes the mother, and through the breast milk provides gentle relaxation to the baby. Taken by the mother, it also can help allay colic symptoms in the baby. Although you can take chamomile as a tincture, it's best to drink as a tea, steeped for only 10 minutes to ensure a pleasant flavor. Drink throughout the day or shortly before bed to promote restful sleep. *Dose: Same as catnip.*

- **Lavender** (*Lavandula angustifolia*). This lovely herb lends itself well to teas and can be used in tinctures. Both forms provide deep but gentle relaxing actions for the nervous system. It's beneficial when there is difficulty sleeping. *Dose: 1/2 teaspoon tincture one to three times daily; tea, same as catnip.*

- **Lemon balm**. Classically known as the "gladdening herb" because of its uplifting effects on the mood and emotions, it's a gentle nervous system tonic, typically used as a tea. Its delicate lemony flavor blends well with other tea herbs, and when used by breastfeeding mothers, its calming effects are conveyed to the baby through the breast milk. *Dose: Same as catnip.*

- **Skullcap** (*Scutellaria lateriflora*). Use skullcap to support the nervous system, reduce tension, promote restful sleep and treat irritability. It's also helpful for mild forms of postnatal blues, the result of inadequate sleep, exhaustion and overstimulation. Generally taken as a tincture. *Dose: 1/2 to 1 teaspoon tincture two to four times daily.*

Galactagogues: Breast-milk Promoters:

- **Blessed thistle** (*Cnicus benedictus*). This herb has a long history in promoting breast milk in new mothers. It also has properties that help allay uterine bleeding, making it an all-around beneficial herb for the postpartum mother in the first few weeks. It can help offset mild irritability and also is a good general digestive tonic, particularly when there is sluggish digestion. This herb is bitter, so take a tincture rather than a tea. *Dose: 1/2 teaspoon tincture three times daily.*

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- **Dandelion leaf** (*Taraxacum officinale*). Much like nettle, this is a highly nutritive green plant, rich in trace minerals and iron. The best way to take dandelion leaf to promote breast milk is as a fresh green vegetable cooked with a bit of lemon and butter for flavor, taken several times per week. The fresh spring greens are the least bitter and are quite delicious. Use in tincture form for treating constipation. *Dose: 1 teaspoon tincture twice daily.*
- **Fennel** (*Foeniculum vulgare*). Another herb classically listed among those that promote breast milk, fennel has a mild, pleasant taste. It makes a palatable tea, or use it as a flavoring for other, more bitter tinctures for promoting milk. *Dose: 1 to 2 cups tea daily. To prepare, steep 1 teaspoon seeds in 1 cup boiling water for 10 minutes.*
- **Fenugreek** (*Trigonella foenum-graecum*). This herb has long been used to encourage milk production. Take it as a warm tea while trying to establish or improve the milk supply. You may take it alone or in combination with other galactagogues and nervines, and it also may be used in tincture form. *Dose: Same as fennel.*
- **Nettle**. This is a wonderful herb to use for enriching and enhancing breast-milk production, while providing optimal nutrients and energy for the mother. Often recommended in large quantities — as much as 1 quart of strong tea daily — but even a cup or two daily or several times a week, will bring significant benefit to the overall well-being of the mother. Nettle also can be eaten as a fresh green, but be careful of the sting during preparation. Cooking destroys the sting.

New Mama Nutrition:

Paying attention to nutrition during pregnancy can be time-consuming and exhausting, as you try to eat carefully to ensure your baby's proper growth and development. Many women find this awesome responsibility almost overwhelming and are relieved when pregnancy is over and they can go back to eating "normally." However, nutrition during breastfeeding is every bit as important. In a nutshell, good nutrition while breastfeeding means eating foods that are good for you — and a bit more than you would normally consume. Breast milk production requires even more calorie intake than pregnancy. This is because you are continuing to provide 100% nourishment for a rapidly growing baby undergoing not only enormous physical development, but also tremendous brain development in the first six months after birth.

During the first few days postpartum, you have unique considerations. First of all, many women are nervous about having a bowel movement soon after birth. Healthy digestion is the key to avoiding constipation and difficult elimination. Eat plenty of fruits and vegetables, drink ample quantities of water and keep away from hard-to-digest foods, such as peanut butter, dairy products and red meat (with the exception of red meat cooked in stews). Raisin bran muffins made with blackstrap molasses are a natural laxative, as are stewed or soaked prunes. Traditional foods for women in the immediate postpartum period are amazingly similar cross-culturally. Foods typically include soups or stews with grains (for example, barley stew); meat and vegetable soups (like chicken soup); plenty of eggs, chicken and grains; and starchy vegetables (sweet potatoes, winter squash). Fruits in season may be encouraged as well. Such foods nourish the blood while the protein in them helps with the speedy and effective repair and replenishment of body tissue. Avoid foods that might irritate the breastfeeding baby, including spicy foods and vegetables in the cabbage family, as well as foods that might inhibit elimination in the mother.

Best Breastfeeding Diet:

The optimal breastfeeding diet, like the best pregnancy diet, is full of nutrient-dense foods. These are foods that contain a maximum amount of nutrition with a minimum of empty calories from sugar and fat. A yogurt smoothie made with fresh fruit is a nutrient-dense food loaded with protein, minerals and vitamins; potato chips are empty calories, providing mostly fat and salt. Foods that are nutrient dense include yogurt, eggs, beans, fish, tofu, chicken, sweet potatoes, leafy green vegetables and vegetables in general, avocados, sunflower seeds, walnuts, almonds, peanut butter, hard cheese, whole grains and fresh fruits. It's simple to build your diet around these foods, as there are so many options.