



Transcend the challenges and discover the deep joy of new motherhood by taking time to nourish yourself—physically, emotionally, and energetically—with these ageless holistic tools. **By CLAUDIA WELCH with Scott Blossom**

# Mother Nurture

## Yoga and Ayurveda for Postpartum Bliss

THE DAYS, WEEKS, AND MONTHS following childbirth mark a radical and powerful transition period for both mother and child. “Just when you think the hardest part—the birth—is over, you realize the ride has just begun,” says Chandra Easton, a Bay Area yoga teacher and mother of two. Each birth—and every recovery—is unique. But all women share certain universal needs and challenges. Giving birth—either vaginally or by Cesarean—takes tremendous strength and energy.

The first couple of months afterward, a woman’s tissues need to heal and her prana flow must readjust. She needs to settle into the rhythms of nursing, support her own digestive health as well as her baby’s, find time to nurture herself physically and emotionally, figure out how to get enough sleep, and, finally, regain her strength, flexibility, and ultimately her ideal weight.

After the birth of each of her children, Easton spent the first few weeks mostly in bed—resting, nursing, healing, and enjoying the magical time with her baby. A close friend and ayurvedic practitioner gave Easton and her baby daily *abhyanga*, or warm oil massages, to replenish them both. Later Easton incorporated gentle restorative yoga poses that, she says, “helped me heal myself and nurture my newborn baby.”

If you’re a new mother, or about to become one, practices from ayurveda and yoga, like the ones Easton used, can be invaluable allies on your postpartum journey, helping you heal on a deep level

and navigate new challenges with ease.

Happily, what benefits you also benefits your baby, not just during this postpartum time but for the rest of your lives.

### Basking in the Afterglow

Too often, in our stress-filled, haste-driven lives, we inadvertently rush through the postpartum process, eager or anxious to return to work. According to ayurveda, this hardly fosters the short- or long-term health of the baby or the mother.

In Sanskrit, the term *sutaka* describes powerful transitional times like birth and death. *Sutaka* has several meanings, including “charioteer,” one who transports precious cargo between the heavens and the earth, and “mercury,” a metal capable of alchemical transformation from liquid to solid states. In the birthing process, *sutaka* applies to the baby, who moves from one fundamental experience of reality (being in the mother’s womb) to another; to family members, midwives, and others pres-

ent for the passage; and of course to the mother, who transitions from pregnancy to parenthood.

*Sutaka* begins in earnest with the altered state of awareness you enter during labor and delivery, and remains very strong for two weeks following the birth; but *sutaka* can extend for the whole first year—to varying degrees—as long as you remain in transition. In this altered state, you may become acutely aware of your own prana, as well as your child’s. You may experience this as a deep sense of connection with—and acceptance of—your own needs and your baby’s; less anxiety over small things; profound relaxation; and a feeling that “all’s right with the world.”

This altered state allows you to bond with your baby easier, and you may even find that your judgments, worldview, and emotions have shifted and softened, and you feel more vulnerable. Ideally you want to have quiet, reflective time with your baby for at least two weeks, and preferably a full six weeks, to bask

in this state for as long as you can before jumping back into your normal day-to-day routine. Even if you don't have that luxury, you should still set boundaries. Keep sounds and other sensory stimuli to a minimum so your baby can adjust to life outside the womb. And move more slowly during this tender postpartum time so your tissues can begin to heal and your prana can re-establish its normal rhythms. You can address these two pressing needs concurrently, but don't be surprised if it takes six to eight weeks or longer to restore your tissues and prana to a healthy balance.

### Restoring Prana

Prana in the pelvic area and in the organs of elimination and reproduction is called *apana vayu*. During childbirth, this downward-moving energy (which normally regulates the timely movement of feces, urine, and menstrual blood) becomes especially active. After birth, the increased *apana vayu* needs to calm

down to restore the integrity of the pelvic muscles and organs and to readjust the excess space that exists in your belly—space that the baby, placenta, and nourishing fluids had occupied. If you don't address this space properly, imbalanced *apana vayu* can cause constipation, pain, excessive uterine discomfort or contractions, prolapse, or other complications. Ensuring that *apana vayu* returns to a normal flow will facilitate the healing of your tissues and the restoration of your body's natural rhythms.

Nursing, binding the abdomen with a soft supple cloth, gentle breathing and visualization techniques, and *abhyanga* are all effective ways to balance *apana vayu* right after giving birth.

**Nursing** immediately after delivery stimulates the release of the hormone oxytocin, which causes the uterus to contract to its normal size. Oxytocin is also responsible for feelings of tenderness, warmth, and togetherness. From an ayurvedic perspective, the physical act

of nursing helps develop healthy pranic flow for both you and your baby.

**Binding the abdomen** for at least one to three months postpartum encourages any displaced abdominal organs and tissues to return to their proper positions, and helps the overstretched abdominal muscles heal and knit back together. It allows blood and nourishing fluids to return to their prepregnancy flow.

First massage warm untoasted sesame, almond, or jojoba oil (preferably organic) around your abdomen and low back to help nourish the tissues and prevent stretch marks. Then wrap your abdomen with a wide elastic bandage or any soft stretchy cloth. The bandage should feel snug but not uncomfortably tight. Begin this process immediately after birth and continue it for about six weeks, taking it off when you shower. If you've had a C-section, check with your doctor first to make sure this practice will not disturb the incision, stitches, or healing process.



### HEALING YOGA

For the first six weeks after childbirth—or at least until any bleeding or discharge (lochia) has stopped—you should limit your yoga to restorative poses, according to Easton. Supported backbends and plenty of *shavasana* (corpse pose) help to nourish and heal the tissues.

**Salamba supta baddha konasana** (supported reclining bound angle pose). Lie back on a bolster, and place blankets or blocks under the outer thighs for additional support. Visualize the inhalation pouring into your low back, belly, and pelvis like a stream of warm water; sense warmth and nourishment at your abdomen. On the exhalation, relax the weight of your head completely into the support of the bolster, and soften your throat and shoulders.

**Shavasana with sandbags on the thighs.** Lie in *shavasana* with your knees supported, and place two 5- to 10-pound sand or rice bags on top of your upper thighs, just below your hips. Place your palms on your belly with each index finger touching the top of your pubic bone, and the thumbs connecting below your navel. Relax deeply. The weight on the upper thighs has a powerful calming effect on the nervous system, strengthens respiration, and encourages *apana vayu* to circulate. You can add *ujjayi* breath to help calm the mind.

### HERBAL REMEDIES: First Six Weeks

**Arnica Montana 6x** (homeopathic pills). Take until your tissues have completely healed. Avoid coffee and mint while taking any homeopathic remedy.

**Yunnan Baiyao.** Place ¼ bottle of the powder on your tongue and wash it down with warm water, four times a day for one week immediately after delivery to help stop bleeding and heal tissues.

**Pippali and Turmeric.** Mix ¼ teaspoon of pippali (*Piper longum*) and ½ teaspoon of turmeric (*Curcuma longa*) powder with 1 teaspoon of honey and ½ teaspoon of ghee. Place half the mixture on your tongue in the morning and wash it down with warm water; use the other half in the evening. This preparation helps tone organs and supports good digestion.

(All loose herbs mentioned here are available through [banyanbotanicals.com](http://banyanbotanicals.com))

## NOURISHMENT FOR HEALTHY NURSING

**Eat wholesome foods** like stews, soups, whole grains, and baked veggies such as yams, squash, carrots, and asparagus. Add a little fresh ginger, black pepper, turmeric, and ghee to aid digestion. Ample protein and good quality fats like ghee, olive oil, and coconut oil are nourishing and help build the blood.

**Make spiced rice porridge.** Cook 1 cup of rice with 1 teaspoon of turmeric, 1 to 2 teaspoons of salt, ½ teaspoon of pippali, 1 teaspoon of fresh ginger, and 3 to 4 cups of water, until the rice is mushy. Garnish with fresh cilantro and eat a small bowl of this a couple of times a day for the first two weeks. (This recipe can replace the pippali and turmeric preparation on the previous page.)

**If you can tolerate dairy,** drink a cup of warm milk, an hour before bed, laced with a pinch of nutmeg, cinnamon, and cardamom, and a drizzle of maple syrup. If dairy is out, try organic almond, hemp, or rice milk instead.



**Abhyanga** with copious amounts of warm oil soothes and strengthens the mother's strained tissues. It also helps pacify apana vayu stimulated by the delivery process. Bala oil, in particular, eases muscular strain and strengthens tissues, but other oils, like untoasted sesame oil, almond, or jojoba are beneficial as well. For the baby, abhyanga is calming to the central nervous system and is great after her evening bath to promote sound sleep, better digestion and elimination, and a healthy immune system. (See "Abhyanga for Baby" on page 52 for technique.)

### Mother's Milk

Over the last few decades, reams of scientific studies have clearly demonstrated what ayurveda has known for millennia: Nursing is good for you and good for your baby. The list is extensive and impressive: The baby's general health, growth, and development benefit from mother's milk; nursing significantly decreases risk of diarrhea, botulism, insulin-dependent diabetes, ear and respiratory infections, digestive and urinary infections; and it enhances cognitive development, increases resistance to a variety of communicable diseases, and lowers the

risk of some childhood cancers.

As the mother, you also profit from nursing your baby in myriad ways. First, nursing contracts the uterus more quickly, resulting in less postpartum bleeding and lighter menstrual blood loss for months after delivery. It also helps you return to your prepregnancy weight sooner, improve your bone strength, and reduce your risk of breast and ovarian cancers.

Even so, nursing your baby can drain your energy, especially since the demands of parenting don't allow for much rest. You've already lost a lot of blood when you gave birth. Now you not only have to replace that blood but you need to build up blood and strength for the two of you. Pay attention to your diet, and resist the urge to turn to stimulants like coffee, black tea, or energy drinks, says Easton. They may give you a temporary energy boost, "but they also tax the adrenal glands and set up a vicious cycle of blood sugar highs and lows."

Ayurveda teaches that breast milk derives from healthy *rasa*, or juice, the nourishing, cooling, strengthening fluid in the body. *Rasa* also contains *ojas*, the ultra-refined substance responsible for many

of the milk's immune-enhancing benefits. To support healthy production of *rasa*, eat a diet of predominantly whole, freshly cooked foods that are easy to digest, and get ample rest. Good quality *rasa* nourishes both you and your baby.

Healthy *agni*, or digestive fire, coupled with a healthy diet, provides the foundation for healthy *rasa*. A new mother's *agni* is generally strong, but you still need to pay attention. If you develop poor digestion, that could contribute to your baby's indigestion or colic. Eat what you and your baby can digest. Sipping fennel tea helps improve digestion, as well as the quality and quantity of your milk. If your baby is colicky, you can even give her a few drops of fennel tea to relieve her symptoms.

Nursing your baby can be hard on your upper body, making your neck and shoulders achy and sore. Easton recommends gentle neck stretches and shoulder rolls; *uttanasana* (standing forward bend pose) with hands interlaced behind your back; gentle forward folds like *bala-sana* (child's pose); and mild supported backbends, such as *shavasana* over a rolled blanket placed behind the shoulder blades, perpendicular to the spine. >>



## The Promise of Sleep

Sleep deprivation, in Easton's opinion, is the main challenge for a new mother. Learning to nap, she says, was revolutionary for her but imperative. She would go into her room, close the door, pull down the blinds, get under the covers and think to herself as she drifted off, "This is the most important thing for me to do right now. I am taking this nap for the benefit of myself and for all those around me." Of course, you can't get too attached to a particular schedule. Your sleep will not be regular for quite some time, she says, "so learn to accept it and enjoy the moon and the stars outside with your child if you must." And, of course, share the care—make agreements with your partner to take turns.

Simple pranayama, which you can do even while you nurse, can have a balancing effect on the nervous system, helping the body and mind to deeply relax and gently restore. Activating *ida*, the vital energy channel (or *nadi*) ending in the left nostril, is cooling and nourishing to the body, while activating *pingala*, the nadi ending in the right

nostril, is energizing. Activating both *ida* and *pingala* serves to balance the mind, body, and hormones.

A simple and safe way to awaken both channels is to imagine prana flowing unimpeded through *ida* and *pingala* in an alternate nostril breathing pattern. Exhale completely through both nostrils, and then, without using your fingers or blocking your nostrils, simply imagine the breath flowing through only your left nostril. Inhale prana from the left side of your lower belly up through the length of the torso along the left side of the spine, and visualize all your internal organs along the way being nourished and healed. Continue the inhalation up through the left side of the face, to a point about 10 inches over the top of the head. Pause without straining, and then imagine you are only able to breathe through your right nostril. On the exhalation, allow the prana to descend down through the right side of your face and spine to the right side of your lower belly. Gently pause and begin again, this time inhaling up the right side. Continue this pattern for about 15

minutes and end after a complete exhalation on the left. Take a few full breaths and return to breathing normally.

Easton recommends a bedtime restorative practice. Lie on your back and move into a gentle spinal twist, holding for three minutes on each side. Sit up slowly and move into *upavishtha kona-sana* (seated angle pose), resting your head on a pile of blankets or a bolster or two, for 5 to 10 minutes. Finish with a variation of *supta vajrasana* (reclining thunderbolt pose): Begin by sitting on your heels, feet together and knees about hip-width apart, then lie back onto your elbows or your shoulders, supported by a folded blanket or a bolster as needed; hold this pose for 5 to 10 minutes. Do each pose according to your capacity, staying no longer than what feels appropriate for your body.

You'll also benefit from walking, which stimulates your pineal gland, supports your natural circadian rhythms, and helps restore hormonal balance. Begin gentle walks when you feel ready, gradually increasing the length of your walk to about 20 to 30 minutes daily.

## Abhyanga for Baby



**This warm oil massage** can soothe and calm your baby before bedtime (and, no surprise, when baby sleeps better, mom sleeps better). After her bath, lay your baby down on a soft surface in a warm, cozy place, and begin to talk lovingly to her. Rub a generous amount of warm oil into your hands (untoasted sesame, almond, bala, or jojoba oils work well) and begin:

- Start with the baby's scalp, being careful not to press on the fontanel, the soft spot on top of the head.
- Massage her neck and shoulders and then gently move down the torso, making little figure-eight patterns around her chest.
- Rub the belly in a clockwise direction, which can soothe baby's digestive tract.
- Massage her back, running your hands along the spine.
- Rub her bottom and groin gently, making your way down the legs with vertical strokes along the muscles, and circular strokes around the joints. Do the same with the arms.

Note: Don't feel bad if your baby won't lie still for her massage. Be playful and relaxed, doing as much as you can under the circumstances. If your baby cries, then just do a brief massage before putting on her diaper. —Chandra Easton

## The Baby Blues

Aside from the sweet altered state of bliss many mothers experience for the first few weeks, it is also fairly common to experience postpartum emotional imbalance, ranging from mild blues to, in more rare cases, severe depression. Ayurveda describes a couple of common causes for postpartum depression and how they are related. But first, know your symptoms. If you feel weepy, anxious, and exhausted for a couple of weeks after childbirth, you are in good company. At least 80 percent of new moms feel the same way. On the other hand, if those baby blues last longer or become more severe (panic attacks, insomnia, excessive guilt), you should seek guidance from your health care practitioner.

**Depleted rasa.** If you had mood swings or depression because of depleted *rasa* before your pregnancy, you may be more prone to the same condition after delivery. Why? Because all the extra juice that pregnancy affords masks the symptoms during pregnancy, but after losing blood and *rasa* during the birthing process—and even more as you nurse—the symptoms can resurface with a vengeance. If this is the case for you, pay even more attention than usual to rebuilding your *rasa* and your blood through diet, supplements, and stress relief.

**Imbalanced hormones.** Stress is a major contributor to the postpartum blues. Combining ayurvedic and tantric theory with Western science, we can find an elegant method of treatment. Sex

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hormones and stress hormones represent opposing forces of nourishment and stimulation, respectively, in the body and emotions. *Ida* and *pingala* represent the corresponding dual forces. So doing 15 minutes of gentle *nadi shodhanam* (alternate nostril breathing) every day—or the simple pranayama described earlier—will go a long way toward rebalancing your hormones and helping you regain mental and emotional equilibrium.

In ayurveda, the word *brimhana* means “building” or “nourishing.” *Brimhana* qualities are heavy, dull, cool, oily, smooth, dense, soft, stable, and sticky. Increasing these qualities in your food

and in your life can increase energy and blood and counter the tremendous output of energy that occurs during and after childbirth. Diet, of course, is important, but sometimes even eating well doesn't solve your energy problems. Luckily, other lifestyle factors come into play that can increase *brimhana* qualities. You can use herbal supplements, but you can also surround yourself with quiet, nurturing people. Ask for what you need. This is no time to be shy; it's a time to be cared for. Ask someone to change a diaper, make you soup, run a bath or an errand, massage your shoulders, or just spend time with you while you nurse. >>



### HERBAL REMEDIES: Mood Boost

Mix 4 tablespoons of ghee with ¼ teaspoon of saffron and stuff the mixture into dates.

Heat 1 cup of milk with a pinch of cardamom and ginger, 1 teaspoon of shatavari ghee, and 1 teaspoon of either date sugar or maple syrup. This helps build your blood and facilitates emotional healing. (Shatavari ghee is available through [ayurveda.com](http://ayurveda.com).)

Take 2 American Ginseng capsules twice a day, washed down with warm milk (or milk substitute). This increases *brimhana* in the body, nourishes the blood and fluids, and has a calming effect on the central nervous system.

## Getting Your Figure Back

If you're like most women, you're probably wondering if your body will ever return to its prepregnancy size and shape. Resist the urge to diet, especially while you're nursing. You need ample, high-quality nourishment to provide for your baby's needs and to have the reserves you need to restore your energy and strength. So, don't worry about numbers on a scale or extra fat around the middle and concentrate on building your blood back, which ultimately will make exercise much easier. It just takes time.

For at least the first six to eight weeks, limit your exercise to restorative

yoga poses and slow meditative walks in nature. Your body's precious resources should go toward knitting your tissues back together and healing them. Focusing on staying relaxed and patient should also be a priority, because that will aid in rebalancing your pranic flow. Prana doesn't move well when you're stressed, and blood does what prana does. When prana circulates smoothly, blood follows suit, which facilitates physical and emotional healing. If you can cultivate patience for the first few months, you will steadily gain strength without depleting your nervous system.

🔊 Download a guided hatha practice and find more holistic tips for new moms—including ayurvedic remedies for colic and mastitis—at [YogaInternational.com/postpartum](http://YogaInternational.com/postpartum).

From an ayurvedic perspective, how fast a woman regains her figure has a lot to do with her constitution. Vata- and pitta-type women typically return to their prepregnancy weight within a year or so, while women who have more kapha can take much longer and may experience a semi-permanent change in their bodies. While this may sound like bad news if you have a kapha constitution, take solace in the fact that kaphas usually have a much easier time with almost every aspect of pregnancy and delivery, and they suffer less from postpartum imbalances, such as insufficient lactation and anxiety. Kaphas are juicy by nature and mothering is all about being juicy.

While every woman has her own time frame for returning to her ideal weight, ayurveda has a good rule of thumb for when to decrease the amount of food you're eating and to increase your exercise goals. As you begin to wean your child, you will likely require less food. At that point it is safe to reduce the amount of calories you're taking in. That doesn't mean your digestive fire is beginning to weaken. It means you are conserving more *rasa*, since you are nursing less, and you don't need as much food. You should still have a strong appetite, but you will be satisfied with less food.

A woman's body develops according to nature's clever plan. The changes that take place during pregnancy literally reshape your body so you can carry, deliver, and care for your baby. While the first three months postpartum are the most critical, you should not pressure yourself to get your figure back for at least a year or two. For now, think of the extra weight you carry, especially around the abdomen, hips, and breasts, as resources you need for the rigors of motherhood. ■



### POSTPARTUM PRACTICE

“Getting your body back” means more than merely losing those last stubborn 5, 10, 20 pounds. It means nurturing and strengthening your whole body, inside and out. If you do some kind of yoga every day—whatever your energy allows—your body will find its way to its perfect, most healthful weight in good time. The key? Listen to your body. If some days, even at three months postpartum, you feel like doing slow, methodical sun salutations, do that. If you feel like spending 10 minutes in child's pose and another 15 in supported bound angle, why not?

A good rule of thumb, according to Easton, is to design a practice during the first three months that centers on rejuvenation. That could include restorative poses as well as poses designed to gently lift and tone the uterus—like *adho mukha shvanasana* (downward-facing dog) or supported *viparita karani* (inverted action pose) with the pelvis resting on a bolster or blankets, knees bent, and calves resting on a chair. The second three months, add strengthening poses, such as lunges, *phalakasana* (plank pose), and *utkatasana* (chair pose). The third three months, include balancing poses and sequences that open the back and shoulders: *vrikshasana* (tree pose) to improve your posture, strengthen your spine, and energize your whole body; *prasarita padottanasana* (spread-legged standing forward bend) with your arms clasped behind your back to open your shoulders and strengthen your legs; and *urdhva prasarita padasana* (upward extended feet pose) to stretch your spine and tone your belly, waist, hips, and buttocks.