

# TCM Nutrition during Pregnancy

BY DORIS RATHGEBER

*In all parts of the world, nutrition for expectant mothers is an important, but often controversial, topic. With seemingly thousands of rules on how to stay healthy, what to do and what to avoid, soon-to-be moms can easily get confused.*

While living in Shanghai, many of us have adopted Chinese beliefs and habits because they are also beneficial to our “Western-style” lives. The Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) view on nutrition during pregnancy might be another example that helps a woman during this new experience in her life.

In TCM, the reproductive health of a woman is based on the energetic functions of her liver, spleen and kidney systems. An imbalance of one organ, or between two organs, can lead to reproductive disorders.

According to TCM understanding, the liver is the organ system that stores blood and regulates the flow of Qi. The spleen system is responsible for the production of Qi and blood, as well as for the regulation of blood flow. Both organs are closely related to Qi and blood, two fluids which are very important to pregnancy.

The kidney is in charge of the storage of the prenatal “essence.” The Chinese believe that every human is endowed with a congenital “essence” that is given by the mother to the baby during pregnancy. This essence will be consumed throughout a person’s life to provide the body with life energy. Healthy lifestyle and good nutrition increases the amount and quality of the essence for the newborn.

Once pregnant, a woman is exposed to many changes in her body. A new life is growing inside her womb and she needs to take special care of the baby, and herself, during her pregnancy.

In Western understanding, good nutrition can help prevent disease and promote health. Especially during pregnancy, the soon-to-be mom is advised to select a balanced diet that is high in nutrients and fiber, and low in “bad” fats and cholesterol.

The TCM dietetics differentiates between the three prenatal trimesters, each with special changes for the mother and the child. The first three months is the period when the baby is most dramatically forming in the mother’s body and the mother has to endure several hormonal and physical

changes. Morning sickness is a common phenomenon. This is the best stage to eat neutral and warming foods such as soups/stews made with pumpkin, cabbage, potatoes, and carrots; or meats such as chicken or salmon. To warm and comfort the spleen and stomach region, ginger is an excellent complementary food that is also quite famous for its ability to ease morning sickness.

In TCM, the general condition of being pregnant is often called a “hot” condition. In the second stage of pregnancy, the baby grows fast, resulting in increased blood circulation in the “Penetrating Channel.” Many pregnant women experience a “yin” blood deficiency and a heat condition which can lead to excessive thirst, insomnia, heartburn, night sweats, flushing, and constipation. It is advisable to eat “reinforcement” foods for the baby and cooling foods for the mom to counterbalance the heat in the body. Cooling foods include vegetables such as broccoli, artichoke, eggplant, zucchini, mushrooms, asparagus and tomatoes. Other good foods for this stage include salads or fresh fruits such as apples, bananas, pears, strawberries, pineapples, melons, cherries, and mangos. It is important to limit the consumption of red meat, soy-based foods, fried foods, and sugar. Caffeine and alcohol must be strictly avoided throughout the whole pregnancy. For reinforcement herbal remedies, you should consult your TCM doctor.

During the last trimester, reinforcement food for the baby can be dropped, but the mom can continue eating cooling food for the duration of her pregnancy. Nutrition is only one aspect of a healthy pregnancy for both mom and baby. Every expectant mother is advised to keep her body fit by doing light outdoor exercises such as walking and/or swimming, or relaxing exercises such as yoga or meditation. Herbal medicine and acupuncture can help with discomfort during the pregnancy. ✍

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