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Herbs For Pregnancy & Childbirth

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Part II

Birthing

Women who have prepared themselves mentally, emotionally and physically throughout the 9 months term of pregnancy will usually have few problems when the time for delivery comes. At this time the midwife's role is to offer help and support whenever and wherever necessary. Traditionally only the midwife, a helper and the mother would have been present at birth. These days birthing parties are gaining in popularity and often loving friends are invited to share in the experience.



However, from the mother's point of view and from that of the Baby as well it is best to keep the party small, and only allow close friends and relatives to be present. People who are there only to watch can get in the way and the mother might subconsciously feel stressed by the attendants.

To welcome the new soul to the planet the birthing room can be prepared by evaporating essential oils such as Lavender, Rose, Jasmine, Neroli and Clary Sage (not ordinary Sage!) in an oil-burner and lights should be softened or turned down. Traditionally, seeds of the Ash tree (Ashen-keys) and [Juniper](#) twigs and berries were burned on the hearth to purify the room. Sometimes the mattress would be stuffed with Lady's Bedstraw, (*Galium ssp*), not just to sweeten the air, but also to ease the birthing process. This is the crucial time for mother, child and midwife alike. In the old days, when there was no chance of getting a woman to a doctor or hospital, the midwife had to be prepared for all eventualities.



If the uterus had not been toned properly contractions may be too weak and prolong the duration of labour. This makes the process unnecessarily exhausting and difficult and can also endanger the baby's life due to the lack of oxygen. To induce stronger contractions herbs such as Squaw Vine (*Mitchella repens*), Beth Root (*Trillium erectum*), Golden Seal (*Hydrastis canadensis*) and Blue Cohosh (*Caulophyllum thalictroides*) may be given under such circumstances. The

midwife should determine which herb is the most appropriate to use. Golden Seal for example is only recommended as a last resort as the effects can be very powerful and often quite painful as well, whilst Beth Root can be taken safely even a week prior to birth without ill-effects. Breathing techniques are a much gentler way to stimulate contractions. Ancient Chinese and Egyptian sources mention Cannabis sativa as a useful plant for childbirth, inducing contractions whilst simultaneously reducing their painful effects. Unfortunately this most beneficial ancient healing herb in most countries is no longer available for medicinal purposes and its use in conjunction with childbirth would be frowned upon.

The first thing the midwife would do after the birth is to wash the baby in fresh spring-water. But before presenting the child to the mother, the midwife first had to welcome the

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baby to the planet. Thus, she would wrap it up in its swaddling clothes and take it outside to greet Mother Earth and Father Sky and all the plants and animals around. Only then was the newborn given to the mother.

Immediately following the birth there is a great sense of euphoria in the air - soon to be followed by exhaustion, especially on the part of the mother. What she needs most now is rest. Provided that there have not been any complications, the best thing the mother can do now is to take a bath herself and to get some sleep. However, sometimes things don't go so smoothly. Excessive bleeding after delivery can be a problem. An internal astringent, such as a tea made from Shepherds Purse (*Capsella bursa-pastoris*) and [Ladies Mantle](#) (*Alchemilla vulgaris*) can soon check the loss of blood. Beth Root (*Trillium erectum*), [Yarrow](#) (*Achillea millefolium*) and Oak bark (*Quercus robur*), taken as a tea help to astringe the dilated womb and return it to its normal size and shape. An infusion of these herbs can also be added to the bath or sitz-bath after birth. For a relaxing bath right after birth certain essential oils such as Bergamot, Rose, Neroli, Clary Sage and Jasmine can be blended into a wonderfully soothing bath-mix.

Giving birth is probably the most exhausting and depleting process anyone could ever go through. It is important to give the body the strength to deal not just with the birth itself but also with what follows on its heels. Tonic herbs and vitalizing foods are indicated to recover one's strength after the birth. Lemon Balm (*Melissa officinalis*), Blessed Thistle (*Cnicus Benedictus*), St. Johnswort (*Hypericum perforata*), Motherwort (*Leonurus cardiaca*), Cleavers (*Galium aperine*), and Rosehips (*Rosa canina*) not only have a strengthening effect on the whole body, but also act as anti-depressants should the mother be overwhelmed by the experience - a phenomena more common than is generally assumed. One should remember that pregnancy sends a woman through the most profound hormonal changes, which have their repercussions on the physical as well as mental and emotional states of the mother. Hormonal imbalances can produce feelings of depression. Herbs that act on the liver and thereby re-establish the hormonal equilibrium can alleviate the symptoms of such hormonally based depressions. However, make sure there are no dangerous drug interactions between these herbs and other medicines you might be taking, as can sometimes be the case.

As far as the baby's health is concerned it is still largely dependent on the mother's nutrition since it still gets its share of everything the mother consumes via the milk. Sometimes the mother does not produce enough milk to feed her baby. Thankfully nature has made provisions for just about every human condition, including lack of milk-flow. A tea of Goats Rue (*Galega officinales*), with its stimulating effect on lactation can come to the mother's aid. Certain seeds rich in essential oils, such as Caraway (*Carum carvi*), Dill (*Anethum graveolens*) and Fenugreek (*Trigonella foenum-graecum*) are also indicated. It is easy to add these seeds to the normal diet. They also have carminative properties, which gives them the added advantage of helping to keep colic and flatulence under control. If the flow of milk needs to be decreased however, either because of over-production or because the mother wishes to wean the child, an infusion of Sage (*Salvia officinalis*) is indicated.

Most nursing mums will sooner or later complain about sore nipples especially once the infant starts teething. A soothing application of Marigold oil or ointment may be all that is needed to remedy the situation. Some tribes have used internal and external applications of Beth root to deal with inflammations of the mammary glands and nipples. A tea is given internally whilst a paste made from the fresh root is applied externally. This soothes any inflammation without stopping the milk flow. Inflammations and rashes can also be treated with a decoction of Oak bark (*Quercus rubor*), which may be applied as a bath or liniment. Anti-inflammatory and immune-system stimulating herbs such as Cleavers (*Galium aperine*) and Echinacea (*Echinacea angustifolia*) may also be useful. Babies' bottoms also sometimes get sore. Nappy rash can best be treated by adding an infusion of Oak bark (*Quercus rubor*) and Marigold (*Calendula officinalis*) to the bath-water and



exposing the affected skin to the air as much as possible, minimizing the skin contact with wet diapers.

Herbs are wonderful healers. With regard to childbirth and general 'female reproductive system complaints' nature excels in providing an abundance of soothing, toning and strengthening remedies. In no other area of natural health care does it make more sense to use herbs than in midwifery. Herbs are the midwife's natural helpers and if she knows how to use and administer them wisely, they will be more than 'helpful' in ensuring a worry-free pregnancy, easy birth and a healthy child.

(Please refer to a trained midwife, who does know and use herbs in her practice for further information concerning specific doses etc. This article is not intended as a self-help guide, but simply as an attempt to stimulate interest in herbal alternatives to chemical remedies.)

SOME NOTES ABOUT INDIVIDUAL HERBS

(only the less well known herbs are getting a mention here as it is assumed that most readers will know about the medical benefits of such common herbs as Chamomile, Peppermint, Lemon Balm and Raspberry leaves)

Beth Root

(Trillium erectum)

Also known as Birth Root because of its traditional use as an herb that prepares the womb for pregnancy and aids the process of labor. Native Americans, who first taught the white settlers how to use this herb, employed it immediately before, during and after birth, thus easing labor and reducing pain and loss of blood. It is also used for menopausal complaints, such as palpitations or excessive blood flow. It contains a precursor for the female sex-hormones, which the body will either absorb and utilize or allow to pass straight through the system depending on whether or not it is needed to help balance the hormonal system - a good example of how herbs can have a self regulating effect on the body. Simultaneous internal (as a tea) and external applications (as a poultice of the fresh root) of this herb can be used to treat inflammations of the nipples and mammary glands without reducing the flow of milk.

Black Cohosh

(Cimicifuga racemosa)

Native Americans first taught the white settlers the uses of this herb as well. Black Cohosh has a balancing effect on the sex hormones and tones the female reproductive system. The root can be used to ease cramping and menstrual pains as well as easing labor pains and speeding up the birth process. Other uses of this herb include an infusion for arthritis, rheumatism and neuralgic pains as well as applications for insect bites and stings. For uterine problems it combines well with Blue Cohosh. Do not take during the early stages of pregnancy. In cases of difficult labor the midwife will know when and how to make use of this herb if necessary - do not attempt self-treatment.

Black Haw

(Viburnum prunifolium)

Closely related to Cramp Bark (*Viburnum opulus*), this herb can be used as an antispasmodic for painful menstruation or false labor pains and as an astringent for excessive bleeding after birth. In the event of a threatened miscarriage it can be combined with Cramp Bark (*Viburnum opulus*) and False Unicorn Root (*Chamaelirium luteum*). Some tribes used it to relax and tone the musculature of the womb if the fetus was badly positioned so they could adjust its position manually.

Blessed Thistle

(Cnicus Benedictus)

Generally speaking, thistles tend to be useful for liver complaints. Blessed Thistle is no exception though it is less powerful than Milk Thistle as a cleansing herb, it has great anti-depressant effects and generally tones the system. It is also helpful as a stomach tonic and can be used to reduce colic and wind. Its astringent property helps to stop internal bleeding after birth or in case of excessive menstruation.

Blue Cohosh

(Caulophyllum thalictroides)

This is another favorite uterine tonic of Native American medicine. It can be used prior to conception to prepare the womb and tone up the system. Its antispasmodic properties help to alleviate cramping in false labor pains and menstrual cramps and it may also be used in cases of uterine weakness when a miscarriage is threatened. In such cases it is best combined with False Unicorn Root. Do not use it as a general tonic during pregnancy, though. Native American midwives administer regular small doses of this herb for about a week before the child is due. This seems to make labor easy and almost painless.

Cramp Bark

(*Viburnum opulus*)

The bark of this shrub is very useful as an antispasmodic for treating menstrual pains and cramps. It can also be used in combination with False Unicorn Root in cases of threatened miscarriage. Its astringent properties will help stop excessive bleeding after birth, or due to heavy menstruation or menopausal problems.

False Unicorn Root

(*Chamaelirium luteum*)

This herb has a long standing reputation as a uterine tonic. It regulates hormonal imbalances (especially when coming off the pill), brings on suppressed or delayed menstruation yet is also extremely useful in cases of threatened miscarriage. It can be used for morning sickness and ovarian pain. Generally, small amounts are used as large doses can cause nausea and vomiting.

Lady's Mantle

(*Alchemilla vulgaris*)

One of the 'Old World' favorites for toning the female reproductive system. It has been used to reduce pain associated with menstruation and excessive bleeding as well as for delayed or suppressed periods. Menopausal problems can also be treated with this herb.

Chasteberry

(*Vitex agnus castus*)

This herb also balances the female hormone system. The seeds of this tree are excellent for toning the uterus and normalizing hormonal imbalance especially when coming off the pill or during menopause.

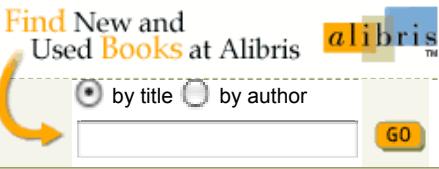
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