

# Post-partum practices among Vietnamese and Chinese patients

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Chinese and Vietnamese make up a large proportion of foreign born in the US according to Census Bureau. Yet their healthcare needs have not been fully understood. Following postpartum rituals can be very important for many Chinese and Vietnamese women. It helps to reconnect the new mother to her culture and family heritage, increase her social status, and is believed to prevent many future ailments.

“Sitting month” is a folklore ritual observed by many postpartum women in Vietnam and China (other Asian countries also observe similar rituals). Differences in local custom, family social structure, degrees of acculturation in the US, and economic status shape these practices and determine how strictly women adhere to them.

According to Oriental medicine theories, it is believed that postpartum women are deficient in Yin and are predisposed to attacks by wind or cold. Thus they are urged to observe 1-3 months’ ritual which consists of dietary restrictions, minimal physical activity, no hair washing, and preventing exposures to cold or wind.

These measures are believed to help women regain their energy and prevent ailments of old age such as poor vision, digestive disorders, uterine prolapse, back pain, headaches, varicose veins, wrinkling of the skin and premature aging.

Many of these practices are not ‘harmful’ from the Western perspective and providers may want to acknowledge patients observing their cultural heritage.

However, some practices and beliefs conflict with hospital routines (offering birthing mothers ice water or shower post-partum). Some rituals may be harmful and care providers need to be alert and inform their patients.

The goal of this handout is to increase awareness among practitioners serving Asian patients so that excellent care is delivered with sensitivity to patients’ values.

## Examples of Dietary Restrictions:

- All cold food and drinks including ice water
- Sour food and fruits
- All fresh fruits and vegetables.
- Some women have also been encouraged by their families to restrict fluid intake.

## Foods new mothers are encouraged to eat:

Rice, pork, black-skinned chicken soup, bean curd, gluten rice, garlic, ginger, and sometimes, wine. These are considered neutral or warm and are beneficial. All foods are well cooked and served hot.





## **Bathing restriction:**

To avoid stiff joints and arthritis in old age, traditional post-partum guidelines prevent women coming into contact with water for one month following birth. Some women who are less adherent to these guidelines sponge themselves and their babies with warm tap or pre-boiled water.



## **Restrictions in physical activity:**

Post-partum women are discouraged from exerting themselves. Traditional oriental medicine texts recommended light physical activities but strict followers advocate total bed-rest for the entire ritual to allow their joints to return to their normal form. Family members usually assume care for the new mother and her newborn. It is thought that these measures will help prevent joint aches later in life.

## **Restriction in exposure to people and the elements:**

Traditionally, it is generally believed that post-partum women are weak and are 'toxic' as evidenced by the presence of the postpartum discharge. Postnatal discharge or lochia is thought to be contagious and for that reason other women are discouraged from coming into contact with it. Likewise, sexual intercourse is prohibited for fear of transmitting the disease to her husband. The woman is considered weak and vulnerable and thus discouraged from going out of the house for fear of being exposed to cold air, wind, or rain.

## **Miscellaneous rituals:**

Other activities believed to be beneficial include:

- Heating coals under the bed & placing a hot water bottle on the belly to reduce lochial discharge and hasten uterine retraction.
- Avoiding reading or watching television to prevent poor eye-sight later in life.
- Supplementing newborns with water.
- Keeping a knife under the pillow
- Avoiding running, jumping, or cutting nails.

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