The Water Element
Why It’s Important to Help Mothers Keep Water in the Diet
by Susan Perri. Photos by Jennifer Rosenberg

According to Traditional Chinese Medicine, the water element embodies the virtue of knowledge, most importantly knowledge of the self. Balanced water relishes quiet and isolation and, in fact, needs these things in order to tune into that quiet inner knowing. Balanced water moves slowly and with clarity. It is described as “sitting in the lap of God,” or the essence of finding comfort and strength in knowing one’s life purpose. The water element can be nourished and encouraged with foods that are naturally salty and represent some connection to water, such as seaweed. Other options include miso, tamari, kidney beans, millet and root vegetables. Keeping water in the diet and in the body can help the kidneys to do their job of flushing the toxins out of the mom’s system.

**Dandelion (Taraxacum officinale):** Use the leaves and flowers as kidney aids. These are high in potassium and will help maintain the essential balance of electrolytes while flushing out the system. The root is an excellent liver tonic. If the liver is overwhelmed or deficient, its work goes to the kidneys. Whenever there is kidney stress, it is a fine idea to also assist the liver. The whole of the dandelion plant is suitable for long-term use with total safety and no known cumulative toxicity.

**Nettle (Urtica dioica):** Another natural diuretic, nettle is extremely nourishing to the kidneys and adrenals. This herb is especially good for stress and depletion in the renal system. Recommended use is infusion; this is another fine choice for extensive, long-term use.

**Cornsilk (Zea mays):** Cooling and demulcent in nature, cornsilk soothes irritation and inflammation, making it a valuable option in approaching cystitis. The infusion is sweet and pleasant tasting and can be used as needed.

**Cleavers (Galium aparine):** This works on the lymphatic system to stimulate immunity, as well as being an effective diuretic. Fresh tincture is recommended: 20 to 30 drops, 3 to 4 times a day as needed.

**Bearberry (Arctostaphylos uva ursi):** Also called **uva ursi,** this herb is not only diuretic and demulcent, but also astringent and antiseptic. It has a remarkable action as an antibacterial in the urinary tract and is a potent, effective herb specifically for bladder infections. Emphasis is on short-term use during pregnancy. Use one cup of the infusion (the leaves are the medicinal part) once in the morning and then again in the evening until all symptoms subside. Follow-up care requires continuing with one cup of the infusion daily for three days after the last symptoms disappear. Use of bearberry during pregnancy should not exceed one full week.

**Echinacea root (Echinacea angustifolia, purpurea):** A well known antibiotic alternative, echinacea acts by boosting liver and immune system function to fight infection. This medicinal root is a good one to try if these other options prove unsuccessful. Recommended use is a tincture dose of half the individual’s body weight in drops every three hours. With a bladder infection, it is important to continue treatment even after the symptoms subside to safeguard against re-infection, as bacteria can linger in the system for a few days.

**Preeclampsia**
A late pregnancy complication, preeclampsia is signified by the warning signs of edema, hypertension and protein in the urine indicating kidney distress. A mystery to modern medical science, the only theory that makes good sense is the one linking preeclampsia to poor prenatal care and nutrition. The best way to treat this condition is to avoid it with the best possible prenatal care. This involves not only eating well, but also eating enough. Pregnant women need a minimum of 2,400 calories daily. Nutrients to pay attention to are potassium, sodium and calcium. Deficiencies of these three nutrients are connected to preeclampsia. Protein, as well, is an essential component to a healthy prenatal diet and integral to the developing fetus. The recommended daily dose is 80 grams per day.

Issues of kidney strain call us to nourish and reconnect with the water element, to enter into the silence and our own inner knowing. The importance of taking the time to care for oneself deeply during this life-altering experience of childbirth will help in the months of transition ahead. Relish in the maiden self and the last moments of sacred alone time, uninterrupted by the newborn babe.

If you are faced with preeclampsia, it is very important to have qualified care. You can assist the natural functions of the kidneys with the herbs listed in this section, as well as with the regular use of the following tea blend.

**Kidney Strengthening Tea**

2 parts nettle
2 parts goldenrod
1 part cornsilk
1 part dandelion leaf/flower

**Hypertension (High Blood Pressure)**
During pregnancy, the heart enlarges to accommodate the mother’s extra blood and body weight. The heart works overtime in the final weeks of pregnancy for about an extra twenty to thirty pounds of body weight. Support wellness with the following cardiovascular tonic plants, which will help natural circulatory function and reduce elevated blood pressure. Assist and nourish the kidneys with general, strengthening kidney tonic herbs. Again, the element of water is important in helping the kidneys to function effectively.

When hypertension exists, it is often accompa-
nied by edema. Hypertension can indicate that kidney stress is also present and likely to manifest in some form. The following botanicals all share the common virtue of being vasodilators, opening the blood vessels to allow freer and easier blood transport.

Garlic (Allium sativa): Abundant in antimicrobial volatile oils, garlic is a wonderful plant food for the cardiovascular system. It helps to reduce high blood pressure, balance cholesterol, and dispel blood clots. Eat it raw and often for best results.

Hawthorne berry (Crataegus oxyacanthoides): This stimulates or relaxes heart function according to what is needed. An infusion made from the dried berries can be taken in sips or spoonfuls throughout the course of one day, with the entire dose not to exceed one cup. The tincture dose is 5 to 10 drops up to three times a day.

Horse chestnut (Aesculus hippocastanum): A renowned venol tonic, horse chestnut is specific for restoring and improving vein health and integrity. Use 10 to 20 drops of the tincture three times daily. This nervous system relaxant can be quite helpful where stress and anxiety precipitate hypertension.

VARICOSES

The extra weight of pregnancy causes a form of stress seen as varicose veins and hemorrhoids. This oftentimes clears up after the birth, when normal body weight is resumed. But during pregnancy, these issues can indicate a more serious complication, especially when accompanied by edema and/or hypertension. Please seek the advice of a skilled health care provider if you experience any of these symptoms at once. Your care provider can determine the course of action through blood pressure readings and urine screenings; if both are consistently normal, you have the common sort of varicosity that will most likely disappear after birth. In the meantime, for the final weeks of pregnancy and following the birth, you can employ herbs traditionally used for such discomforts.

Astringents are herbs that have the quality of drying, shrinking and binding tissues. They help to reduce inflammation, swelling and secretions. These can be used internally, externally at the site of stress and in baths. The element of water helps here as a form of comfort and relief.

HOW TO USE ASTRINGENTS

Liniment: Extracts of selected herbs can be combined and used topically. Apply several drops to a cloth or cottonball and saturate the appropriate area.

Poultice: Extracts can be added to powdered bentonite clay to make a paste, which is then applied to the affected area and allowed to completely dry. Poultices can be removed when dry and freshly reapplied.

Compress: Made from a strong tea of the chosen herbs, a compress consists of a cloth soaked in the cooled tea (the warm infusion tends to further aggravate conditions) and directly applied where it is needed.

Bath: Whether it’s a full body bath or the smaller size Sitz bath (specifically for hemorrhoids), bathing is an excellent way to partake of the healing energies of herbs. The herbal essences are taken into the body through the pores of the skin, and the external areas needing attention are sufficiently reached as well. Infusions or decoctions of the appropriate herbs can be added to a bath, as can tincture doses.

THE HERBS

Blackberry root (Rubus villosus): An old Native American remedy for diarrhea, blackberry root is an excellent astrigent that is remarkably effective in just a few tincture doses. Varicosities also respond well to external methods of treatment with blackberry root.

Witch hazel bark (Hamamelis virginiana): Available in the popular form for external use in drugstores, witch hazel is a safe and effective astrigent with additional benefits as an antiseptic.

Oak bark (Quercus): White varieties of oak followed by red are ideal choices for deep reaching astrigent action.

Yarrow (Achillea millefolium): The fresh tincture made from flowering yarrow tops is beneficial in shrinking swollen tissues and checking fluid secretions.

CONSTIPATION

Another issue that appears as pregnancy progresses is constipation. As the growing baby occupies a larger space and exerts more pressure on the surrounding organs, nearly all pregnant women experience this symptom to some degree. Again, birth is the most potent remedy, but in the meantime there are helpful natural remedies.

I feel traditional herbs for clearing constipation and improving regularity are unsafe for pregnancy. These herbs can tax vital organs with extended use, and in this phase of pregnancy the organs are already working hard. The more nutritive food-type plants are still a good option for treating constipation. Bulk fibers, in the form of grains and/or vegetables, are a worthwhile choice for keeping the digestive tract clear and the bowels regular. Fiber helps absorb water and keeps constipation at bay. In addition, close attention to diet will also relieve blockages. Pregnant women should avoid heavy and difficult to digest foods.

Bulk fibers:

Oat bran
Celery fiber
Wheat bran
Flaxseeds
Prunes
Psyllium husk powder

All of these can be found in powdered form and added by the teaspoon to a glass of juice or tea. Mom should take the mixture once in the morning and again in the evening, if needed, to encourage regularity. The powders can also be added to muffins or sprinkled onto cereals. Prunes can be eaten whole and fresh, dried, or juiced. Flaxseeds can be added to baked goods or eaten with grains and salads.

As you can see, the water element plays an important part in many aspects of a woman’s health during pregnancy. Be aware of these complications and discomforts that can begin simply with water imbalance in a woman’s body and diet. Keep these herbal and homeopathic remedies in mind as a way to “be there” for women in need.

Susan Perri is a clinical herbalist and founder of Blue Crescent Botanica. The information here is from her book The Complete Herbal for Pregnancy and Childbirth. For more on books, herbal formulas and education, visit www.bcbotanica.com.