

Chapter 13

**Puerperal (Postpartum Period) Food  
as a Traditional Treatment Method**

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Traditional treatment methods and folk remedies are used in Turkey for treating diseases, besides modern medicine. Applications within traditional treatment methods are mostly related to food and drinks. Folk remedies are prepared from the roots, leaves, flowers and seeds of various plants including nettle, hibiscus, nigella, harmal, and camomile.

Besides folk remedies, food eaten to maintain a healthy body and to treat diseases are a crucial part of traditional treatment methods. For example, colloquially, dead nettle is recommended to be eaten at least once in a year for healing. It is believed that trotter or calf bone which is boiled for hours is healing for broken bones. In making of these soups, garlic, which is essential in folk remedy is widely used.

According to the data gathered from the field research I've carried out in various areas and with various groups in Turkey and my observations from this field research, communities have a shared and strong belief that some meals have healing effects in puerperal period. In this special period, folk remedy which encourages the use of specific food as treatment is used. Current practices in folk remedy are transferred from generation to generation by midwives and mothers. In this article, I want to explore the foods which are believed to have remedial properties during puerperal period and also are described as a prominent part of themselves by culture bearers.

Puerperium (post-partum period), in modern medicine, is described as the period beginning immediately after the birth of a child and extending for about six weeks; thus, the puerpera is the woman in the first forty days after giving birth. It is the time after birth, a time in which the mother's body, including hormone levels and uterus size, returns to a non-pregnant state.<sup>1</sup> Traditional knowledge in Turkey is parallel to this description. Among the people, puerpera is believed to "have her grave opened for forty days". These forty days equal to what modern medicine foresees as the normalization process after birth. Great care is taken of women during this puerpera period, and some healing or protective precautions are taken to protect them from illness. Puerperal meals prepared for this reason have two basic goals. One of them is to heal and protect the new mother from diseases by the use of these meals. The other one is to enhance breast milk, which is crucial for the baby's health.

Puerpera is thought to heal and continue her daily life by what she eats. Mothers and mothers-in-law, especially are very insistent about this issue towards their daughters and daughters-in-law. They share their knowledge about their own births, what they ate and what they did not eat to the young mothers. What is more, relatives or neighbours who have given birth before, also get involved in this process. Puerpera is like being under the protection of society.

We can examine the post-partum period food as a traditional treatment method as; foods and desserts made from flour, oil and/or sugar, egg dishes, "Lohusa Sherbet" and food eaten to enhance breast milk.

### **FOODS AND DESSERTS MADE WITH FLOUR, OIL AND/OR SUGAR MOLASSES**

#### **Hasuta**

The food, which has been given various names in different parts of Turkey, such as *hasuta*, *hasuda*, *haside*, *haviçi*, *paluze*, *pelvize*, has a special place among puerperal foods. Wheat, cornstarch or starch are browned

with oil until they reveal a beautiful scent. Water or milk is then added and cooked as slurry. Hasuda can be prepared as a dessert by adding sugar, sherbet or molasses. On request, melted butter is poured and walnut is spread. Hasuda can be made from the water which is obtained by boiling white mulberry, plum, apple or cranberry. In the words of Mnire Seyran,<sup>2</sup> a tradition bearer from İspir district of Erzurum, (East Anatolia region), “Hasuta is like a medicine for puerpera.” Another tradition bearer, Meral Kekliki,<sup>3</sup> from the Aegean region also said, “We first made starch blanchmange in order to provide fas inner healing of the birth giver, and now we give the puerpera this first. This is our tradition.”

The foods named “*kuymak (mihlama), bulamac*” are also a part of the above mentioned meal group. Flour or starch is added to boiled water and cooked in the form of a slurry, then hot oil, milk or molasses is added in the middle of it. Folk healers, mostly traditional ones, say that “The hot and abundant oil will keep the puerpera warm and so she will not be sick.” Sometimes it is advised to the puerpera to eat a mixture of *pekmez*, honey or sugar and melted butter and drink plenty of warm water afterwards in order to reinforce the healing effect. For peurpera women to be healed inside, “inside” meaning uterus and genital areas, means that the wounds there heal. Puerpera is thought to fully heal and return the woman to her healthy state through the strength these foods have given.

### Halva

*Halva* is believed to enhance breast milk. It is prepared by flour, butter and sugar are the basic ingredients of the dessert halva which is widely

Halva © Cultural Research Foundation



popular in Turkish cuisine. Flour sugar, water and milk sautéed with or without butter, to which is then added walnut, pine nut or other similar dried nuts, named *halva*, or *tahini*.

### Tarhana

*Tarhana* is a soup with dried yoghurt which is widely popular throughout Turkey. It is believed to have a healing effect during the post-partum period. This soup is made by kneading flour, yogurt (Turkish salty yogurt), aromatic grass, and various vegetables and spices, which is then fermented and pulverized by drying under the sun. When the soup is about to be made, this prepared mixture is cooked with water, tomato sauce and other flavours.

### Egg Dishes

Egg symbolizes fertility in Turkish folk culture. It is believed that eggs contain an essence, a living being inside. Another group of meals that are believed to have remedial effects in post-partum period are egg related foods. Shortly after the birth, egg cooked with abundant butter is often the first meal of puerpera. The traditional midwife, Fadime Yıldırım,<sup>4</sup> says “Immediately after the birth an egg shall be cooked and given to the puerpera.” (Yozgat, Central Anatolia region)

Bread food that is made with egg- is also a post-partum period treatment food. This is traditionally made from onion, ground meat and green pepper browned with abundant butter. Egg and water are also added. This mixture is put on *filo* pastry (or bread), and given to puerpera in belief that it will heat her up.

### Lohusa Sherbet

A sweet drink, with slight differences from region to region, is prepared to celebrate birth, keep puerpera healthy and, enhance her breast milk, and also to serve the new mother’s visitors. In most of the regions this is called sherbet, *lohusa sherbet* or *kaynar*.

Ayşe Sarı,<sup>5</sup> a tradition bearer from Tarsus, Mediterranean Region describes making *kaynar* like this, “Cinnamon, clove, ginger and some other spices, a total of 7 or 8, are boiled in water. When it is prepared to be drunk, pulverized walnut and sugar is added. It is drunk hot. It heals puerpera, warms her wounds and enhances breast milk.”

In some of our regions, the sherbet which is hot with cinnamon, and red sugar, *lohusa sherbet*, is served to the visitors who came to see the puerpera with cookies. This red sherbet is thought to protect puerpera from “incubus” (postnatal depression in modern medicine), which is dangerous for her.







**Some Spices for making Lohusa Sherbet.**  
 (a) cardamom, (b) turmeric, (c) hibiscus, (d) *nöbet şekeri*, a crystallized sugar thought to have medicinal properties, (e) measles sugar, (f) clove, (g) ginger, (h) cinnamon  
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### Meals to Increase Breast Milk

Until now I have mentioned the dishes widely consumed for the puerpera's metabolism to return to its pre-birth condition and to protect her from diseases and any heal wounds. Food prepared to treat puerpera is mostly for enhancing breast milk. In cities, especially among young mothers, awareness about the importance of breast milk is increasing. However, mothers who have fed their babies only breast milk do not find this increase in awareness sufficient. The tradition bearer Münire Keklikçi,<sup>6</sup> when talking about the experience of maternity of herself and the women in that area said, "We would not give anything but breast milk to our babies. I have given birth to five children. I have given nothing to them. I only have given my breast for one or two days, then my milk came up. My babies sucked nothing but breast milk until they were 1.5 years old. Nowadays all mothers wear bras so they don't have much milk. They raise their babies on baby food. In our time, everybody had plenty of milk." She blames the bras for decreased breast milk.

The main dish given to puerpera to enhance her milk (actually to protect the baby's health) is cracked wheat pilaf with green lentil. Also thinking that it will enhance milk, food that is made by black-eyed beans, onions and water; olive-oil boiled egg is eaten. For puerpera's treatment and enhancement of breast milk, besides these popular dishes; yogurt, cranberry, rice, and lentil soups are drunk hot. Roasted liver and onion

are among these dishes. In the words of Şerife Kublay,<sup>7</sup> a traditional cook from Urla district of İzmir, (Aegean Region), “Liver is thought to immediately enhance breast milk.”

Visitors who have come to see the puerpera bring foods like hasuta, soup, starch halva, rice pudding, halva. Because puerpera’s organs are accepted as exhausted, soup, hasuta, jelly, *paliza*, rice pudding, *hosmerim* (a sweet made of unsalted cheese), candy, and milk are thought to affect puerpera’s health in a positive way. There are also foods that are not given to puerpera to protect her. Traditional midwives prevent puerpera from eating cold fruits and drinks, hot, spicy foods, white beans, and cabbage because they are flatogenic.

As it is obvious, the Post-partum period in Turkey is a period in which traditional treatment methods are widely used because the woman is open to illnesses and injuries. Most of these treatment methods are about the woman eating specific dishes. Foods used in the puerpera’s treatment period carry similar features, even though this article contains many examples from many regions and cultural groups of Turkey.

In post-partum period, common traits of the treatment methods that of being hot, watery, soft and/or sweet. For these food to be consumed as hot as possible is important for the puerpera to “feel warm inside”, namely to “cauterize” her wounds. The desserts used in all of the transition periods of life (birth, circumcision, engagement, marriage, death) are also important in post-partum period health. Another feature of the dishes made to protect puerpera from diseases, to cure her and to bring her back to her daily life is that they are made from ingredients that are easy to find locally. Visitors bring those foods to the puerpera.

## CONCLUSION

Turkey is growing to be a city-centred country rather than an agricultural society. And this means benefiting more from modern medicine. Traditional treatment methods and approaches in folk medicine cannot find a place in modern hospitals. But the treatment methods in post-partum period taken from the ancestors have kept proving themselves useful for centuries. The therapeutic effect of these foods is so important that most of the time the rules of modern hospitals are broken and these foods are brought to the puerpera. Given this fact, the issue of whether or not the post-partum period foods would take a place in modern medicine and rehabilitation can be examined by gynaecologists, dieticians and paediatricians and beneficial results can be deduced.

In order to understand if methods used by folk healers’ are viable for modern medicine I think it is important that we know about folk medicine. If this knowledge were to be kept and adapted to modern medicine, it will allow for determining the methods that are dangerous for human health. Studies can be conducted for the beneficial ones to be a source of alternative medicine and modern medicine. If this becomes real, a folk medicine’s treatment can treat a person in a whole different area of the world. That is of course if the knowledge is shared. Actually by bringing these data together in a common platform we can say “Here are the techniques and medicine used by folk healers and folk medicine... Let’s examine and share the results with humanity.”

In the search for sustainable development, in the globalising world, human health cannot be thought to be separate from living creatures’ health and environment. Folk medicine mostly consists of herbs and if

we cannot protect natural environment we will not have access to the herbs used in modern or traditional treatment methods. They will either be destroyed or be extremely dirty, enough for us not to care. Nature knowledge to be transferred to the new generations is also important for protecting environment. Especially herbal folk medicine requires a deep knowledge of nature and it helps protect those endemic species. Folk healers prepare folk medicine with their knowledge and experience of nature. These medicines have useful results and they should be transferred to the new generations. I wish that the protective, curative or rehabilitative foods in post-partum period may take part in this knowledge-sharing platform.

## RÉSUMÉ

En Turquie, les méthodes traditionnelles de traitement post-partum sont le plus souvent liées à la nourriture et à la boisson. Outre un remède populaire, le fait de manger certains aliments pour conserver un corps en bonne santé et pour guérir les maladies constitue un aspect important des méthodes de traitement traditionnelles.

Les communautés partagent une croyance très forte selon laquelle certains repas ont des effets curatifs pendant la période puerpérale. Ces repas ont deux objectifs principaux : d'une part traiter la jeune mère et la protéger des maladies, d'autre part améliorer le lait maternel, ce qui est crucial pour la bonne santé du bébé.

On peut considérer les aliments consommés pendant la période post-partum comme une méthode de traitement traditionnelle, par exemple les plats et les desserts faits à partir de farine, d'huile et/ou de sucre, d'oeufs, de « sorbet Lohusa », et la nourriture censée améliorer le lait maternel. Pendant la période post-partum, les points communs entre ces différentes méthodes de traitement sont la chaleur, l'aspect aqueux, doux et/ou sucré. Le savoir en matière d'alimentation puerpérale est transmis de générations en générations par les sage-femmes et les mères.

La question de savoir si la nourriture de la période post-partum trouve sa place dans la médecine moderne pourrait être examinée par des médecins spécialistes. Je souhaiterais que ces aliments protecteurs, curatifs ou ré-éducatifs soient intégrés dans une plate-forme commune de partage des connaissances à ce sujet.

## NOTES

- 1 <http://www.online-medical-dictionary.org/definitions-p/puerperium.html>
- 2 Personal communication with M. Seyran (age 60), 20 March 2011.
- 3 Personal communication with M. Keklikçi (age 71), 11 May 2014.
- 4 Personal communication with F. Yıldırım (age 44), 4 October 2010.
- 5 Personal communication with A. Sarı (age 67), 14 March 2015.
- 6 Personal communication with M. Keklikçi (age 71), 11 May 2014.
- 7 Personal communication with Ş.Kublay (age 61), 4 July 2016.