

BABY'S OUT, WHAT'S NEXT?

Confinement is a familiar concept to Singaporeans, but mothers from other countries handle their post-delivery period very differently. EVELINE GAN finds out more.



Australia-born Rahel Wise says she only heard of the term after she gave birth to her youngest child here. The 44-year-old stay-home mum, who has lived in Singapore for four years, has four kids aged 15 to two.

"I was quite shocked when I heard about some of the traditional confinement dos and don'ts. I respect the culture here but I don't think I'd be able to go through it myself for a month if I had to do it," she says.

So what did Rahel and mummies from other cultures do after having a baby? *Young Parents* finds out and gets the medical experts to weigh in.

→ TRADITION'S A MUST

Sher-li Torrey's American hubby used to roll his eyes whenever he hears stories about other Singapore mummies' strict confinement practices. But that didn't stop the 36-year-old mother of two, a born and bred Singaporean Chinese, from "playing safe" by engaging a confinement nanny after delivering her two kids, aged four years and 10 months.



Sher-li drank breast milk-boosting soups and special herbal tea made by her confinement lady, wore socks around the house to prevent "wind" from entering the soles of her feet and enjoyed traditional postnatal massages.

"To be honest, I did not believe in most of the practices during my first confinement. I washed my hair within the first few days of giving birth. However, I noticed that I often had shivers and strange aches in my ankles and feet. So, during my second confinement, I took precautions – and they seemed to work," she says.

Filipina Lotte Edwards gave birth to her two kids, now four and two, in Singapore. "But that did not mean I was free from our culture's postnatal practices," she says. "My mother travelled all the way from the Philippines both times and made sure I strictly adhered to them."

The 32-year-old sales and marketing manager was expected to rest well, which meant no cooking, cleaning and lifting anything heavier than the baby. Upon her mother's insistence, Lotte also bound her abdomen with a soft cloth – another traditional confinement practice in the Philippines – for a whole month to help her belly return to its pre-pregnancy state.

DOCTORS SAY While there's no medical evidence that exposure to wind is detrimental to a new mum's health, eating and resting well are certainly important, especially during breastfeeding, says Dr Ben Choey, a specialist in obstetrics and gynaecology at SBCC Women's Clinic (Clementi). A nutritious, balanced diet also helps build immunity and assists with wound healing.

There may also be some truth that postnatal massages can help a new mum get back her figure faster. "Theoretically, massages do stimulate uterine contractions, which may help the uterus to go back to its original size sooner," says Dr Choey.

But even if you don't undergo such massages, the uterus will eventually revert to its pre-pregnancy state after six weeks, says Dr Choey. Any postpartum discharge will also naturally clear up in six to eight weeks.

Mums who have had regular vaginal deliveries can start the massages and tummy binding within the first week. But if you've had a C-section, you'll have to wait at least six weeks, he advises.

WHILE KOREANS HAVE PRACTICES SUCH AS AVOIDING DRAFTS AND NOT WASHING THEIR HAIR IMMEDIATELY AFTER BIRTH, THERE ARE NO FOOD TABOOS.

→ I NEED A SHOWER

Traditionally, mummies in China are discouraged from bathing and washing their hair soon after birth. Such "cooling" activities may bring on health problems like rheumatism, joint pains and headaches later in life, explains Wu Min, a senior physician at Eu Yan Sang TCM Clinic in Sembawang.

"If the confinement period is in the winter, most people will only bathe, say, once a week or not at all. It also depends on the family's wealth." In harsh winters, families who don't have heated bathrooms will go to public baths to shower.

So, naturally, for mummies going through confinement, they may not shower too often, adds the 45-year-old, who hails from northern China and has two kids aged 19 and eight.

If the confinement period is in the summer, then most mums will choose to take quick showers. But definitely not with cold water, and not every day, she adds.

However, Ranjani Srinivasan, a 37-year-old Singapore permanent resident, says in India, there are nurses who help new mothers shower a day after delivery.

"It's not a long-drawn luxury bath. These nurses simply go around the maternity ward and help new mums take a quick two- to three-minute shower," says Ranjani, who has two children aged 13 and nine.

American Heather Hockenberry, who's married to a Chinese and has lived in Singapore for two years, says she jumped into the shower as soon as she could after delivering her daughter, now eight.

"Well, I'm 46 now and haven't had any rheumatism or joint problems... yet," she says.

DOCTORS SAY There's no medical reason why mums should not shower or wash their hair after delivery, especially in the hot and humid Singapore weather. In fact, maintaining good hygiene lowers the chance of infection, says Dr Choey.

"Hair washing will also not cause future health problems. On another note, your husband may also prefer a clean and fresh-looking wife," he adds.

→ ANYTHING GOES

Unlike many local mummies, these new mothers have no postpartum dietary restrictions to adhere to – except for those that interfere with breastfeeding.

Japanese stay-home mother Fumiko Frappier says she ate anything and everything after she delivered her daughter in Singapore four years ago. The 38-year-old is married to a Canadian.

"In Japan, I've never heard of any postpartum dietary restrictions. The new mothers continue with their usual diets like sushi and seafood, and we don't take anything special like tonic soups. I could drink cold water, too, if I wanted to," she says.

She recalls eating lots of pasta and vegetable stews during her postpartum period because her mother-in-law came over from Canada to help out for several weeks after her delivery.

While the Koreans practise certain confinement practices such as avoiding drafts and not washing the hair after birth, Kelly Yu Hee Kyung says there are generally no taboos when it came to food.

New mummies are, however, encouraged to drink as much seaweed soup as they can because it's believed to nourish the blood and breast milk supply.

The 36-year-old manager, who has two kids aged four years and 16 months, has lived in Singapore for the past 12 years.

"I think the Chinese are a lot more particular with their confinement diet, but in South Korea, I've never heard of not eating this or that after delivery. It's more about having a balanced diet," says Kelly.

DOCTORS SAY Eating a nutritious, balanced diet is a must if you're breastfeeding, say the experts. You need the energy – and more of certain nutrients such as protein and B vitamins when you're breastfeeding.

If you don't eat well, your own nutrient stores may be used up for breast milk, explains Dr Tan Thiam Chye, a consultant at the Department of Obstetrics and Gynaecology at KK Women's & Children's Hospital (KKH).

A rule of thumb would be to eat when you're hungry and drink when thirsty – now's not the time to diet!

Dr Tan advises eating according to the healthy diet pyramid for pregnancy: Six to seven servings of carbs, two servings of fruit, two servings of veggies, two servings of meat or other protein alternatives, and two to four servings of milk and dairy products.

Go easy on caffeine (one or two cups of coffee a day is okay) and alcohol, as they're passed through breast milk to Baby, he adds.

→ A GHEE-FUL TIME

According to Ranjani, new mums in her hometown of Chennai are advised to take a light diet that's easily digested, such as steamed dishes and soups. That means no deep-fried food or dishes that are too spicy or "exciting" for the digestive system, she explains.

But when it comes to ghee – a type of clarified butter high in fat – new mums are encouraged to take plenty of it.

"Ghee is believed to help the uterus heal faster. The high fat content is also believed to be beneficial to nursing mothers," says Ranjani. During her 40-day confinement period, she also took a homemade jelly-like tonic specially made from ghee, herbs and spices every morning.

"It's rolled into the shape and size of a tennis ball, and tastes really bad. But I ate it all up anyway because it's akin to a multivitamin, and is supposed to be good for new mothers."

DOCTORS SAY It's true that certain vegetables like cabbage and onions can cause tummy bloat and worsen wound pain, especially in mums who've had C-sections.

But there's no need for nursing mothers to increase their fat intake if they're eating a regular, balanced diet, says Dr Choey.

Check with your doctor before you take any tonic, as certain types may affect breastfeeding and recovery. For instance, ginseng – believed to improve circulation – is a popular postpartum tonic, but too much of it can be harmful to C-section mums because it diverts blood to the womb, adds Dr Choey.



→ BUSINESS AS USUAL

Fumiko says most modern Japanese mums typically go about their regular life shortly after childbirth – including cooking their own meals and doing the household chores.

Traditionally, new Japanese mums live in their parents' home for about a month after delivery to recuperate. However, Fumiko says this is no longer the practice, as most city couples live far away from their parents.

Similarly, in most Western countries, most new mummies handle their newborns and household chores singlehandedly, almost immediately after childbirth.

"Mummies in Singapore are very fortunate because they have the option of getting a helper. In Australia, most of us do everything on our own," says Rahel. Heather adds that in the US, Grandma might come over to help out during the postnatal period.

"But it's usually only for a week or so. Sometimes, friends may take turns to cook dinner for the new mum, but most women usually don't have anyone to help look after them and their babies after delivery," she says.

DOCTORS SAY Grandma was wise when she nagged at you to rest and not carry heavy things after childbirth. According to Dr Tan, pregnancy and the process of delivering a baby can weaken supporting ligaments and muscles in the pelvic floor, leading to a womb prolapse (a condition whereby the womb drops down into or out of the vagina). Carrying heavy loads after birth can aggravate this.

Dr Choey adds that doing too much after delivery – especially if you have to do heavy-duty chores – can also worsen backaches. "After childbirth, backaches are common because the ligaments and muscles are still loose. It will take about six weeks or more for them to revert to their original tensile strength," he explains.

C-section mums who carry heavy loads can cause their wounds to give way, adds Dr Choey. If you've had one, avoid doing heavy-duty chores for at least four weeks. Not having enough rest can also affect a new mum's emotional ability to care for the baby and breastfeed.

→ ROOM FOR TWO, PLEASE

After Virginia Chiu gives birth to her second child in August, she'll check herself into a "confinement hotel" for several weeks. There, the lucky Taiwanese mum will have her own private suite and nurses to care for her and her newborn. Specially prepared confinement meals are provided, and Hubby can stay over, too.

The 36-year-old, who works in the publishing industry, did the same for her first child four years ago and counts herself lucky that there's such a service. Virginia says the popularity of such hotels have skyrocketed in recent years, especially among career women living in the city. Similar confinement hotels are also available in South Korea, adds Kelly.

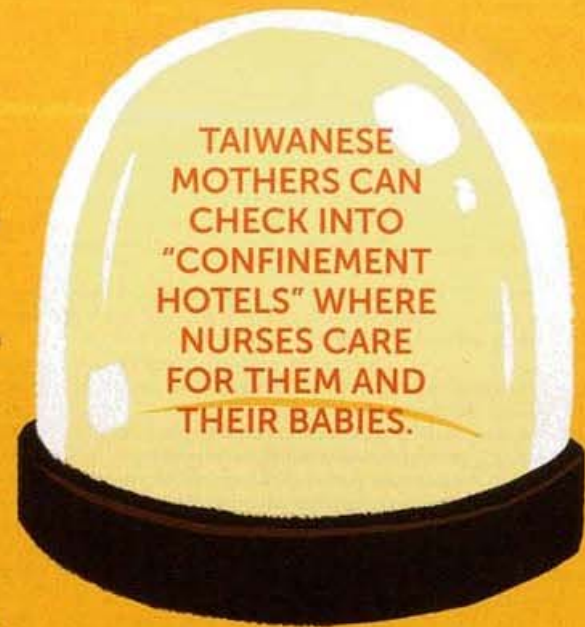
Says Virginia: "Staying there after my first birth really helped me to recover and learn to be a mummy. Nine out of 10 of my friends choose to do their confinements the same way after they have given birth. During the Dragon Year, these hotels are so fully booked that some mummies can't even reserve a room!"

The service doesn't come cheap, though. Some of these hotels in Taiwan charge as much as NT\$10,000 (\$420) per day. Multiply that by 30 days and a confinement stay could set you back more than \$10,000!

DOCTORS SAY While Singapore mums don't have the luxury of such a service, support during the initial postpartum period is still important. Exhausted mothers who have too many hats to juggle are at a higher risk of developing postnatal blues, says Dr Choey.

"If your family can't help, engaging a confinement nanny or part-time helper will help you cope better," he adds.

TAIWANESE MOTHERS CAN CHECK INTO "CONFINEMENT HOTELS" WHERE NURSES CARE FOR THEM AND THEIR BABIES.



→ BABY, LET'S HIT THE OFFICE

Most Asians refrain from taking their babies out until the kids have reached one month old. For mummies who don't have the luxury of having extra help, this practice is hardly possible.

Rahel, for instance, went back to work immediately after she was discharged from the hospital after delivering her eldest daughter. She was running her own business in Australia then, and had to bring her four-day-old newborn along as she had no one to mind the baby.

"When I tell some of my Asian friends about it, they're usually very shocked and ask me how I did it. But of course when they told me about their postnatal customs, I was equally shocked, too," she says, chuckling.

DOCTORS SAY It's actually all right to bring healthy, full-term babies out! In fact, a change of scenery is good for both mother and child, says Dr Chua Mei Chien, senior consultant at the Department of Neonatology at KKH.

But steer clear of crowded, confined spaces such as shopping centres to minimise the risk of catching coughs and colds during the first few weeks. A walk around the park is a good idea, but do avoid taking your newborn out into the sun between 11am and 3pm, when UV levels are at their highest, adds Dr Chua. ☺



WHAT WAS YOUR CONFINEMENT LIKE?
Share your views with us at magyoungparents@sph.com.sg