



[MOBI Motherhood Intl. Home](#) > [Nutrition](#) > [Lactogenic Foods and Herbs](#)

[Low Milk Supply](#)  
[Nursing Strike](#)  
[Baby's Issues](#)  
[Mother's Issues](#)  
[Mother Quotes](#)

[Post-Partum Depression](#)  
[Breastfeeding Stories](#)

## Nutrition

[Lactogenic Foods and Herbs](#)  
[MOBI Herbal, part 1](#)  
[MOBI Herbal, part 2](#)  
[How to Prepare Tea](#)

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## Book Store

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## Lactogenic Foods and Herbs

By Hilary Jacobson CH.HU.SI.

Based on her book *Mother Food* for Breastfeeding Mothers

### What mothers eat can influence their milk supply

Around the world and throughout history, mothers have known that certain foods support their milk production. These foods were valued in earliest cultures and highlighted in mythology. Mother Goddesses were associated with barley grain, the almond, coconut, lotus, the elder tree, and many other plants and foods that were used historically to increase milk production.


Today, mothers dealing with low milk supply are again interested to learn how foods and herbs can support their milk production. Experts who work closely with low-supply mothers report that certain foods influence milk supply for some mothers. These so-called "lactogenic foods and herbs" are the subject of this article.

#### Dietary Guidelines Following Birth

Getting a good start the first few weeks after birth can be helpful in supporting the onset and development of a mother's milk supply:

- Get enough to eat. Simply eating regularly and getting enough calories will support your milk supply.
- Get enough to drink, but not too much. Between 2 - 3 quarts a day is a good goal to aim for. Some mothers discover they need much more, and some find that they need to get "just enough" fluids to maintain an optimal milk supply.
- Eat at least one warm meal per day that includes a source of protein, a portion of green salad, a grain such as millet or rice, and cooked vegetables such as yam, carrot, and fennel.
- Spice moderately with lactogenic spices, for instance with sea-salt or gomasio, with dill or caraway, or basil and marjoram, and, if tolerated, with garlic.
- Avoid food that is hard to digest such as fried or extremely fatty food.
- Take probiotic yogurt or lactobacilli supplements to protect your intestinal flora and to help prevent colic and allergy in your baby(1).
- Get healthy fats such as butter and olive oil, and remember to supplement with essential fatty acids.

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- Herbs useful after birth include stinging nettle to rebuild the blood lost during birth, turmeric, to help prevent breast inflammation, oat-straw, to nurture the nerves and to help prevent nervous exhaustion. These herbs also increase milk supply, so keep an eye on your supply and reduce or increase your dosage of these herbs as necessary.
- If you lost a lot of blood during birth, avoid taking ginger for several weeks.
- A traditional Chinese remedy used in the early postpartum is homemade chicken soup, simmered with the bones for several hours and rich with chicken fat, taken only once a week—otherwise, it is said to over-stimulate the baby. This remedy is reputed to prevent depression, to restore a mother's vitality, and to help develop an abundant milk supply.

## Individual Dosage Requirements

Mothers have individual needs when it comes to lactogenic foods and herbs. Although most mothers produce milk well without having to consider their use at all, a few mothers find that they need to take a good amount every day, and that they may need to take a high dosage for two to four days to kick-start lactation.

As a breastfeeding mother gathers experience about her unique reaction to foods and herbs, she will learn the dosage that works best for her, both for building and for maintaining milk supply.

All mothers should consider the following: If you do not have low milk supply, and you take an abundance of herbs and foods to increase your supply, you may create unnecessary difficulties for yourself such as over-supply, engorgement, plugged ducts, or mastitis. Your baby may develop colic due to too much foremilk, or sucking difficulties due to an overly strong let-down reflex, both of which are common with over-supply. Use these foods and herbs wisely, and reduce or stop their use if you notice such problems.

## LACTOGENIC FOODS

Lactogenic foods support lactation for many reasons. Eating sufficient calories and getting an abundant supply of nutrients is helpful in itself for lactation, but these foods also contain substances that interact with and support the chemistry of lactation. These substances include phytoestrogen, natural plant sedatives, plant sterols and saponins, and tryptophan, among others. In addition, a rich supply of minerals and a good balance of fats ensure that the mother's cells and nerves are functioning at an optimal level.

### Vegetables

#### Fennel

Fennel can be eaten raw or cooked, for instance, steamed, or sautéed in butter and then simmered in a bit of water. Fennel seed is well-known as an herb to increase milk production. The vegetable, containing the same pharmacologically active volatile oils, acts as a gentler support.

### Carrot, Beet, Yam

These reddish vegetables are full of beta-carotene, needed in extra amounts during lactation. Carrot seed has been used as a galactagogue, and the vegetable, also containing the volatile oils and phytoestrogen, acts as a gentler support. The beet is a wonderful source of minerals and iron. Taking raw beet can help alleviate iron deficiency. These vegetables are naturally sweet, and they support the liver.

### Dark Green Leafy Vegetables

Dark green vegetables are a potent source of minerals, vitamins and enzymes, as well as phytoestrogen that support lactation. Dandelion and stinging nettle leaves are diuretic, and can help reduce edema during pregnancy and after birth. They can be plucked from your garden in early spring and eaten whole, chopped into salad, or used to make tea. Stinging nettle can be harvested for salad or cooked as spinach. In your market, you'll find arugula, beet leaves, kale, Swiss chard, spinach, chicory, collard greens and others.

### Grains and Legumes

Grains and legumes have a long history as galactagogues. The most commonly used grains include oats, millet, barley and rice. Oats are the most widely used lactogenic food in the US. Legumes to include in your diet are chickpea, mung beans and lentils.

### Nuts

Nuts that support milk supply include almonds, cashews, and macadamia nuts. As much as possible, eat raw nuts, not roasted or salted. The taste of raw nuts will grow on you.

### Oils and fats

Healthy fats play a vital role in cellular and neural metabolism. The kinds of fats a mother eats will influence the composition of fats in her milk. Please see the article "Dietary Tips for Pregnancy and the Postpartum" for more information.

The renowned expert in fats, Mary G. Enig, suggests that mothers get regular and substantial dosages of butter and coconut oil. In addition, use cold-pressed virgin olive oil, and take equal amounts of cold-pressed sesame oil and flaxseed oil in salads.

One way to balance the fats is to dribble a quarter teaspoon of olive oil, flaxseed oil, sesame oil, and a thin slab of butter over meals. Be sure to eliminate unhealthy fats such as partially hydrogenated vegetable oils and trans fatty acids from your diet, as these will also enter your milk.

In addition, be sure to have a source for essential fatty acids. For more

information, see "Dietary Tips."

## Beverages

Lactogenic beverages include getting enough plain water to hydrate the body, drinking commercial lactation teas, non-alcoholic beer, ginger ale, Rivella, and natural herbal root-beers from your health food store. Check out coffee substitutes based on the lactogenic grain barley, such as CARO, Roma, Caffix, Pero or Dandy Blend. These imitation coffees usually also contain chicory or dandelion, plus malt—ingredients that are all lactogenic. A recipe for "Barley Water," a potent lactogenic beverage, is at the bottom of this article.

## Condiments

### Garlic

Garlic is famous for its medical benefits, and has a long history as a galactagogue.

In one study, babies were seen to latch on better, suckle more actively, and drink more milk *when the mother had garlic prior to nursing*(2). If you do not wish to eat garlic, try adding a capsule of garlic extract to a meal eaten about an hour before breastfeeding.

If you would like to introduce garlic to your diet, and are not used to eating garlic, introduce it very slowly and observe your baby's reaction. Take only 1 - 2 cloves per day. These can be chopped or pressed through a garlic press into any food after it has finished cooking. Try it in vegetables, rice, grains, pulses, salad sauce, spaghetti sauce, or other sauce.

Our culture does not encourage eating garlic, and many people do not tolerate garlic well (or onions, another food which is traditionally lactogenic). For this reason, garlic is not recommended by the American Herbal Product's Association while breastfeeding except under the guidance of a qualified herbalist. However, if you do tolerate garlic there is no reason that you should not benefit from it. Take garlic in moderation as do mothers all over the world.

Caution: Do not combine with anticoagulants, as garlic has blood-thinning actions.

Danger: Babies and small children should **never** be given garlic in any form, whether fresh, dry, powdered or in capsules, to chew, swallow, eat or suck on. Garlic is highly caustic to delicate body tissues, and rubbing it in one's nose or eyes could be painful and dangerous. Babies will benefit from the garlic a mother eats, and that reaches him through her milk.

### Ginger

Ginger is helpful for the letdown and milk flow. Some mothers benefit from

drinking ginger ale. Even commercial ginger ale is flavored with “natural flavoring” that is real ginger.

Warning: Do not use ginger or ginger ale in the early postpartum if there was significant blood loss during birth. Do not take ginger immediately after birth due to danger of hemorrhaging.

Caution: Ginger tends to compound and increase the effects of medication being taken. Talk to your doctor if you are taking medication, especially diabetic, blood-thinning, or heart medicine.

Sources: You can find ginger at your local grocery store. Check out stores that sell Asian foods, health food stores, and on line.

### Spices

Spices in your kitchen can be used to support milk production. Try adding marjoram and basil to your meals, and anise, dill or caraway. Black pepper, taken in moderation, is helpful.

### Turmeric

This powdered yellow root gives curry its yellow color and basic flavor. A potent anti-inflammatory and antioxidant, turmeric is being studied in connection with the prevention of Alzheimer’s disease, rheumatism, and cancer. Turmeric has lactogenic properties and can also be taken to help prevent inflammatory conditions. One half teaspoon of turmeric a day may help prevent inflammation in the breasts.

Caution: Some herbalists warn that pregnant women should not use turmeric if they are at risk for miscarriage.

## SPECIAL FOODS

### Oats (Avena Sativa)

The humble oat is one of our most nutritious foods, and contains proteins, vitamins, minerals and trace elements that nourish the nerves, support the metabolism of fats, and uplift the spirit. In traditional medicine, both the seed and the leaf—called oat-straw—are taken. Oats are prescribed as a nervine tonic in the treatment of nervous exhaustion. In Europe, women traditionally take oats after birth. Oats are taken today in the US to increase milk production, both as food and as a supplement. Like other galactagogues, oats are antidepressant, antispasmodic, and they increase perspiration.

Allergy: Occasional. Persons sensitive to gluten in wheat are frequently able to tolerate oats.

Dosage and Preparation:

Taking large dosages of oats is helpful in kick-starting milk production.

Oatmeal can be taken for breakfast or an afternoon snack.

Oat-straw is especially rich in minerals. It is available as capsules or as an ingredient in so-called "green-drinks." Take as indicated on the package.

Fluid extract: 3 - 5 ml (15 - 35 drops), three times a day.

#### Nutritional and Brewer's Yeast

Nutritional or brewer's yeast frequently leads to a significant boost in a mother's milk supply. Mothers sometimes say that they feel much more energetic and emotionally balanced while taking yeast. This may signal a lack of essential nutrients in their diet, in particular, chromium, vitamin B complex, and especially vitamin B12, found in some brands of fortified nutritional yeast. Brewer's and nutritional yeast also contain protein and good levels of phytoestrogen.

Allergy: Persons who are allergic to yeast should avoid these products.

Side-effects: Occasionally, mothers or babies become gassy, more so with brewer's yeast than nutritional yeast. To be on the safe side, start with a small dosage and slowly increase.

Sources: Vegetarian stores and health food stores.

#### Green Drinks

Green foods are reputed to increase the fat content of breastmilk. Some mothers supplement with chlorophyll. So-called "green drinks" can be very helpful. Their ingredients include barley-grass, alfalfa leaf, spirulina, corellas, kelp, oat-straw and other herbs with lactogenic and medicinal properties.

Caution: Chlorella, a common ingredient in commercial green-drinks, is used by medical specialists to chelate (remove) heavy metals from the body, especially mercury. If not taken at the correct dosage, chlorella can lead to an increase of mercury in the bloodstream and probably in a mother's milk as well. It is wise to choose green-drinks that only contain a low percent of chlorella.

Sources: Super markets, health food stores, online.

#### Green Papaya

Green papaya is taken as a galactagogue across Asia. It is a superb source of enzymes, vitamins, and minerals, including vitamins C, A, B, and E. Green papaya is the unripe fruit, and it needs to be simmered until soft. Green papaya can also be taken in supplement form.

Allergy: Persons allergic to latex may be allergic to papaya and other fruit.

Caution: Persons taking Warfarin should consult with their doctor before taking papaya supplements.

### Sesame Seed

Large, black sesame seeds are used to increase milk production across Asia. Husked, light-colored sesame seeds are also effective and easier to digest. Sesame seed "butter" known as Tahini can be found in health food stores. Sesame is our most potent vegetable source of calcium!

Allergy: Allergy to sesame is becoming more common.

### Spirulina

Spirulina is a non-toxic variety of blue-green algae. It has been farmed in lakes and ponds as a food source for thousands of years. It is valued for its proteins, enzymes, minerals, vitamins, chlorophyll, and essential fatty acids. Spirulina's nutrients are easily absorbed, even when a person's digestion is not up to par.

It is important that spirulina be cultivated on a farm that is not located in waters that are contaminated, in particular with heavy metals. It is also advisable not to use spirulina that has been genetically 'improved.' Spirulina and other "green foods" may increase the fat-content of breastmilk.

Note: It is not wise to rely on spirulina as a source of B12.

### Barley Water

Barley-water is used medicinally to treat colds, intestinal problems (both constipation and diarrhea) and liver disorders. It was recorded in Greek medicine two thousand years ago as a galactagogue. Taken for a week or two, it often helps mothers with chronic low milk supply. Make a pot in the morning and drink it throughout the day, warming each cup and sweetening it with a natural sweetener as desired.

Barley-water can be made with whole grain or pearl barley. Barley flakes can also be used, though these have been processed and are possibly less potent than the whole or pearled grain.

#### Preparation:

- Quick-and-easy: 1/2 cup of flakes or pearled barley can be simmered in 1 quart of water for twenty minutes.
- Long-and-intensive: 1 cup of whole or pearled barley is simmered in 3 quarts of water for up to 2 hours. About half the liquid should cook off. Some recipes call for only 1/2 hour cooking time. However, the longer the barley simmers and the more pinkish (and slimier) the water becomes, the more of the 'cream' will enter the water and the stronger the medicinal effect will be.

- If the barley water becomes too thick to drink comfortably, add in more water.
- When finished, remove from the stove and sieve off the water. The grain is now tasteless and can be thrown out.
- Add 1 tablespoon of fennel powder or steep 2 - 3 teaspoons of fennel seeds for ten minutes in the barley-water before drinking.
- The traditional recipe calls for fennel seed. I personally find that powdered fenugreek seed is tastier than fennel in barley-water.

#### Endnotes

1. While studies on focusing on probiotics and allergy during pregnancy and in childhood continue and are controversial, a series of studies on the anthroposophic community in Europe convincingly shows results of a different composition of bacteria and lactobacteria in the stool of the lifestyle of these children: breastfed, eating naturally fermented vegetables, fewer treatments with antibiotics and vaccines. Therefore in this author's opinion, it is fair to assume that each of these factors, and all of them combined, serve to protect the child against allergy. See:

Alm JS, Swartz J, et al., *An anthroposophic lifestyle and intestinal microflora in infancy*. *Pediatr Allergy Immunol*. 2002 Dec;13(6):402-11.

Alm JS, Swartz J, et al., *Atopy in children of families with an anthroposophic lifestyle*. *Lancet*. 1999 May 1;353(9163):1485-8.

2. Menella J, Beauchamp G. The effects of repeated exposure to **garlic-flavored** milk on the nursing's behavior. *Pediatr Res* 1993;34:805-808.

Mennella J. *Mother's milk: A medium for early flavor experiences*. *J Hum Lact* 1995;11(1):39-45.

[Top](#)

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