

Japanese Pregnancy and Birth Customs

Japanese people tend to be conflict averse and less assertive, and are very likely to put a high priority on the advice of medical professionals even if it disagrees with their personal feelings. The majority of individuals follow the Shinto, Buddhist, or Christian belief systems while many also believe in Confucianism. Gender doesn't tend to be an issue in terms of providers, with most doctors being male in contrast to midwives who are almost exclusively female. Pregnancy and birth, and essentially most health matters and related issues, are treated as very private areas to be dealt with independently and stoically. Multi-generational family units are very common and pregnancy is an unusual time in which typical roles are reversed. Instead of elder members being cared for and deferred to, the mother and baby are given priority.

In Japanese culture, the time of pregnancy is considered a time to pamper and cherish the mother. It is believed that the experience of the mom emotionally has a significant impact on the growth and the development of the baby and their future life. Mom's are advised to avoid emotional and physical stress, as it is believed that this can increase epinephrine levels and that this has a negative impact on the baby. They are advised to avoid any activities or tasks that may be mentally taxing or require a lot of concentration. Hot and cold are also important elements in terms of both body temperature and food. Moms are advised to keep themselves warm, but especially their bellies, so avoid the baby being susceptible to colds. Dark foods that are designated as having "cold" energy, for example eggplant, are avoided, with an old saying in Japanese being common and translating as "Don't let brides eat autumn eggplant" as it is believed this will affect their fertility. Morning sickness, when experienced, is often something that the women suffers alone in silence and is not discussed even within the family. A lot of emphasis is placed on natural pregnancy and child birth. This means that, in contrast to advice given by American

healthcare professionals, Moms continue to eat raw fish or sushi and drink green tea, despite evidence suggesting that mercury and caffeine can have negative impacts, while often avoiding prenatal vitamins. Significant weight gain is discouraged, with most advised to gain at most 6-7 kg, as many believe that this will interfere with the birth process later and make it more difficult as most Japanese women are very petite. One interesting practice is praying to small statuettes called mizuko jizo, which is a spiritual figure that is representative of or said to protect babies lost to miscarriage or still birth. Interestingly there is very little restriction or protest surrounding abortion in Japan.

Labor and delivery occur in the hospital setting or at specialized birthing centers run by midwives. Very few births occur at home. Even in the hospital setting, midwives are often a key part of the team and doctors are very hands off, often not present until the baby is ready to enter the world. Priority is placed on unmedicated labor and delivery and many equate a C-section with a negative experience and are rather judgmental towards the Mom. Many women who have experience the birth of a child in Japan state that they are advised to remain quiet during the process and were reprimanded by the midwife or other staff members if they did not. It is believed that experiencing the pain of labor and delivery in full is important in establishing a family bond with the child. Women are usually allowed to eat and drink freely throughout the process. Most fathers are not present at the birth, especially if a C-section is needed, and instead the patient's mother or other female relatives will attend. Most women remain in the hospital for 3-5 days with vaginal delivery while a C-section usually results in being admitted for up to ten days. Japanese culture suggests that women avoid showering or washing their hair for the first 7 days after delivering the baby. After being released from the hospital, most women, especially first-time mothers, will return to their parent's home to be cared for during the initial post-partum period. In fact, it is custom that mom and baby remain in

bed for 21 days to bond and this allows mothers to learn how to care for their infant. The grandmother is often a central figure in infant care as well. Breastfeeding and formula feeding are equally common, but many Japanese women maintain breastfeeding only for the first several months. Public breastfeeding, even within a designated room or private space, is still associated with a lot of stigma and considered somewhat shameful.

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