

The Primacy of Blood in Pathogenesis and Treatment of Postpartum Headache Complicated by Depression: A TCM Perspective

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Abstract: *Postpartum headache with depression is a common and complex condition in postpartum women. Modern medicine believes that the occurrence of this condition is closely related to factors such as rapid changes in postpartum hormone levels, overwork, and insufficient rest. The clinical manifestations are persistent or intermittent headache, accompanied by symptoms such as emotional anxiety, irritability, and occasional mood swings. Traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) believes that its pathogenesis is primarily closely related to "blood deficiency" and "blood stasis." Subsequently, dysfunction of qi and blood further affects the heart, liver, and other viscera. Postpartum blood deficiency leads to deficiency of both qi and blood, resulting in malnutrition of the heart and brain. Insufficient blood to nourish the brain leads to malnourishment of the brain marrow; insufficient blood to nourish the heart leads to restlessness of the mind. Postpartum blood stasis, qi stagnation, internal obstruction of blood stasis, obstruction of the liver meridian, liver qi stagnation, obstruction of the brain orifices, and pain due to obstruction. Deficiency of qi and blood damages the viscera, leading to insufficient heart blood and impaired liver's dredging and draining function, thus causing the disease. This article takes blood as the foundation and systematically discusses the TCM treatment methods for postpartum headache with depression from three dimensions: tonifying blood and tonifying qi to strengthen the foundation, activating blood and resolving stasis to promote qi circulation, and soothing the liver and regulating qi to relieve pain, providing a theoretical basis and guidance for clinical diagnosis and treatment.*

Keywords: Postpartum headache, Depression, Etiology and pathogenesis, Qi and blood theory, Traditional Chinese medicine treatment.

1. Introduction

Postpartum headache refers to the symptom of headache that occurs in women after childbirth, mostly manifested as persistent or intermittent headache, with diverse pain characteristics such as stinging pain, dull pain, or throbbing pain, accompanied by soreness, vertigo, nausea, photophobia, etc. Meanwhile, there is a close bidirectional relationship between headache and depression, and the prevalence of depression is significantly higher in patients with primary headache [1]. After experiencing the significant physiological process of childbirth, postpartum women, due to excessive blood loss, accompanied by persistent physical discomfort, drastic fluctuations in hormone levels, and insufficient rest at night, are affected by multiple factors intertwined, gradually triggering a chain reaction at the psychological level. Subsequently, in the absence of effective guidance, psychological states such as emotional distress and irritability appear, eventually developing into postpartum depression.

Studies have shown that more than one-third of women experience headaches after delivery, with approximately 75% of postpartum women suffering from benign primary headaches, such as migraine or tension-type headaches [2]; more than 50% of women experience transient symptoms of emotional distress, sadness with tearfulness, and irritability [3]; data indicate that the probability of migraine patients suffering from anxiety is approximately 19.1%, the probability of suffering from depression is approximately 6.9%, and the probability of suffering from anxiety and depression is approximately 5.1%, which is significantly higher than other patient populations [4]; currently, the clinical treatment of postpartum headache with depression in Western medicine mostly uses single-disease symptomatic

treatment methods, and sedative and analgesic drugs and antidepressant drugs are commonly used for treatment. However, long-term use often leads to dependence and addiction, and recurrence may easily occur after drug withdrawal. Traditional Chinese medicine (TCM) treatment mostly considers the patient as a whole and uses syndrome differentiation and treatment, integrating the four diagnostic methods to formulate personalized treatment plans. In clinical treatment, TCM has significant advantages.

Postpartum diseases are often primarily caused by significant deficiency of Qi and blood, Qi deficiency and blood stasis. Therefore, this article, based on the perspective of traditional Chinese medicine's Qi and blood theory, explores the pathological mechanism and treatment methods of postpartum headache with depression in traditional Chinese medicine, providing new ideas for clinical treatment.

2. The Relationship Between Qi and Blood: "Blood is the Mother of Qi"

The concept of "blood is the mother of qi" originated from "Treatise on Blood Syndromes · Yin, Yang, Water, Fire, Blood, and Qi Theory": "Guarding qi is blood." It mainly has two meanings: First, blood can carry qi. Qi belongs to yang, which is active; blood belongs to yin, which is static. Qi must depend on blood to exist and cannot operate independently without blood. Blood is like the carrier of qi. Qi relies on blood and runs in the meridians of the human body, thereby exerting its functions of promoting, warming, and defending. Second, blood can generate qi. Blood provides nutrients for the human body and is the material basis for the generation of qi. Between qi and blood, one yin and one yang, they are interdependent and inseparable. *Ling Shu · Jue Qi* says:

“The middle energizer receives qi, removes the juice, transforms and becomes red, this is called blood.” It means that both Qi and blood are transformed from the essence of water and grain by the spleen and stomach, just as it is said in “Ling Shu·Ben Zang”: “Human’s blood, Qi, and spirit are what support life and circulate through life.” This emphasizes the importance of Qi and blood in maintaining human life activities, and the functions of the whole body’s viscera cannot be separated from the interaction of Qi and blood. There is also a relationship of mutual restraint between Qi and blood, which accurately explains why postpartum women are prone to “multiple deficiency and multiple stasis” constitution. Postpartum women lose blood, and blood carries Qi, Qi follows blood desertion disease, so there is more deficiency; Qi deficiency and blood stagnation, stasis in the pulse, so there is more stasis.

3. The Relationship Between Postpartum Headache Complicated with Depression and “Blood”

3.1 Postpartum Headache is Due to Blood

Jingyue Quanshu states, “Those with blood deficiency can also experience pain because when blood does not flow, qi becomes stagnant.” This means that pain can be caused by blood deficiency and stagnation, leading to qi stagnation. After childbirth, women experience deficiency of both blood and qi, and qi follows blood desertion disease, resulting in blood not nourishing the brain. The brain marrow loses nourishment, clear yang fails to ascend, and the clear orifices lose moisture, which can lead to headache [5]. Furen Daquan Liangfang states, “Postpartum headache, if accompanied by postpartum lochiostasis and stabbing pain in the abdomen and flanks, is due to blood stasis.” Xue Zheng Lun - Postpartum Faint Due to Hemorrhage states, “Postpartum blood stasis rushing upwards can cause headache as if splitting.” In modern medicine, Professor Zhu Ying also believes that after childbirth, women are prone to emotional changes, overthinking, and often feel sad and want to cry, sighing constantly, leading to qi stagnation and blood stasis. Alternatively, blood leaving the meridians stagnates in the uterus, causing qi to rise in reverse. Stasis blood travels along the meridians and invades the head. This is qi stagnation and blood stasis, obstructing the brain collaterals, which can also lead to headache [6].

It can be seen that “blood” is closely related to postpartum headache and is an important pathological factor in the pathogenesis of postpartum headache. Postpartum headache is initially dominated by blood deficiency, and long-term illness leads to blood deficiency and qi stagnation, which hinders propulsion and forms blood stasis, resulting in a mixture of deficiency and excess, leading to obstruction of the brain collaterals.

3.2 Postpartum Depression is Due to Blood

The disease name of postpartum depression can be attributed to the categories of “depression disease”, “hysteria”, and “lily disease” in traditional Chinese medicine. The main causes of postpartum depression can be divided into three aspects: qi deficiency, blood deficiency, and blood stasis [7]. Blood is the

mother of qi, and qi and blood are interdependent and are the foundation of life activities. Sun Simiao pointed out in *A Thousand Gold Prescriptions, Volume 3, Gynecology* that “postpartum deficiency and damage, insufficient blood and qi... palpitations in the heart, unstable emotions.”

It is clearly stated that postpartum blood deficiency can lead to palpitation and emotional instability. *Jing Yue Quan Shu-Women’s Rules* states: “Postpartum women, due to sudden deficiency of Yin blood and excessive Yang Qi, often experience chest tightness, emotional discomfort, and even extreme sadness.” It emphasizes that blood deficiency can lead to the liver losing nourishment, abnormal drainage and catharsis, and then cause liver stagnation; *Fu Qingzhu’s Gynecology* says: “If lochia is not discharged after childbirth, and blood stasis attacks the heart, the heart will be dysphoria, and the patient will be restless.” Blood stasis obstructs the blood vessels, new blood cannot be generated, blood deficiency and Qi stagnation obstruct the meridians, and Qi flows in reverse, leading to emotional abnormalities, dysphoria, and irritability. Thus, it can be seen that both blood deficiency and blood stasis can lead to postpartum emotional depression and low mood.

Postpartum headache and postpartum depression are both related to the pathogenesis of blood deficiency and blood stasis. Blood is transformed from the essence of water and grains, flows in the meridians, and transforms into Ying blood.

The nutrient qi circulates through the vessels and runs throughout the body, reaching the viscera internally and the limbs and joints externally. Blood can generate qi, serving as the mother of qi, and is the carrier and material basis of qi. Blood carries qi to circulate in the vessels, and blood nourishes qi to moisten and nourish the viscera. Both diseases are caused by excessive postpartum blood loss, resulting in disorders of qi and blood function. Blood deficiency makes it impossible to nourish the heart and brain orifices, and qi deficiency makes it impossible to promote blood circulation, resulting in blood stasis in the brain vessels and heart collaterals, which in turn leads to postpartum headache accompanied by depression.

4. Postpartum Headache Combined with Depression Disease Mechanism of Blood Deficiency and Blood Stasis

4.1 Deficiency of Blood and Qi, Stagnation of Yang Qi

Warm Disease Theories Explained - *Difficult Labor and Three Major Postpartum Syndromes Discussed* states: “Postpartum loss of Yin blood leads to blood deficiency, causing Yang Qi to become rebellious, followed by cold stagnation, resulting in dizziness and blurred vision, which is a mental disorder.” This means that postpartum loss of Yin blood causes Yang Qi to lose its dependence and become rebellious, coupled with cold evil stagnation, which then leads to symptoms such as headache, dizziness, and mental disorders. *Miraculous Pivot - Determining Life and Death* says: “When the blood vessels are harmonious and smooth, the spirit resides.” Blood, as the material basis for mental activity, is crucial for regulating mental and emotional

activities. When blood and Qi are deficient, the mind is disturbed, and the brain orifices are not nourished, resulting in headache. Furthermore, blood deficiency leads to Yang Qi stagnation internally, inducing depression disease. Yang Qi, as the original driving force of human life activities [8], and “spirit” is the external manifestation of human life activities, the functional state of Yang Qi directly affects the prosperity and decline of spirit.

In the special stage after childbirth, due to the interaction of various internal and external factors, it is easy to have the Yang Qi stagnated and unable to circulate, failing to reach the upper orifices. If the brain orifices are not nourished, it can manifest as latent headache, emotional depression, and low morale, developing into postpartum headache with depression disease.

4.2 Blood Stasis and Qi Stagnation. Postpartum Qi and Blood are Depleted, and Body Fluid is Insufficient

Qi deficiency weakens the propulsion of blood flow, leading to stasis. Blood deficiency results in inadequate filling of the pulse channels and sluggish blood flow. Blood stasis obstructs the blood vessels, and stagnant blood accumulates in the brain, blocking the brain’s meridians, resulting in headache. Furthermore, because blood stasis impedes the flow of Qi, it stagnates in the internal organs, leading to depression disease. Clinically, patients often present with needle-like pain in the head, low mood, and a desire to cry sadly. Their tongue is often dark red, accompanied by ecchymoses and petechiae, and the pulse is wiry and rough.

Qi stagnation and blood stasis are mutually causative and influence each other. Impeded movement of qi results in dysregulation of qi flow, leading to stagnation in qi and blood circulation, thereby exacerbating manifestations of blood stasis. Blood stasis obstructs the collaterals, preventing the Qi and blood from nourishing the head, eyes, and mind, leading to postpartum headache with depression, which is prone to recurrence, persistent, and difficult to cure.

4.3 Deficiency of Yin-blood and Liver Failing to Dredge and Drain

Yin fluid is one of the material foundations for blood generation. Body fluids infiltrate into the vessels, combine with nutrient Qi, and transform into blood. Blood can also nourish Yin fluid. Blood flows in the vessels, providing nutrients for the Zang-fu organs to ensure the abundance and balance of Yin fluid. At the same time, blood and Yin synergize in function, playing a role in moisturizing and nourishing the Zang-fu organs, meridians, and tissues. The two cooperate to maintain the normal physiological state of the human body.

Blood pertains to Yin, and Qi pertains to Yang. Postpartum blood loss leads to blood deficiency and Yin deficiency, resulting in insufficient Yin fluid. This deficiency prevents nourishment and moistening of the head and eyes to nurture clarity, thus causing headache. The liver is Yin in substance but Yang in function. Consumption of Yin fluid impairs the nourishment of liver blood, leading to liver blood deficiency, abnormal drainage and discharge, and stagnation of Qi. This

subsequently results in emotional depression. Deficiency of Yin blood and impaired liver drainage and discharge are the reasons for postpartum depression accompanied by headache.

5. Treatment Principles for Postpartum Headache with Depression

5.1 Tonifying Blood and Qi to Strengthen the Foundation is the Key

Blood is the foundation of qi, and qi depends on it for its function. Therefore, it can be said that sufficient blood leads to vigorous qi, deficiency of blood leads to deficiency of qi, and exhaustion of blood leads to qi desertion disease [9]. Postpartum blood deficiency leads to qi desertion disease following blood loss. Blood deficiency fails to nourish the heart and brain, the mind is not nourished, the brain orifices become dull, and qi deficiency leads to dysfunction of the viscera. Long-term deficiency of primordial qi makes it difficult to strengthen the foundation, and deficiency and decline of yang qi, with yang damage affecting yin, makes it easier to develop diseases. Qi and blood depend on each other and interact with each other. Therefore, tonifying blood and qi to strengthen the foundation is the key to treating postpartum headache with depression. In clinical practice, for postpartum headache with deficiency of both qi and blood, Professor Yao Zhiling [10] proposed the treatment principle of “treating deficiency with tonification”. Qi and blood are lost with the fetus, which must be a great deficiency, so great tonification should be given priority. The Bazhen Tang (Eight-Treasure Decoction) can be used for clinical treatment. In the prescription, Radix Ginseng and Radix Rehmanniae Preparata serve as the principal herbs, with Radix Ginseng greatly tonifying primordial qi and tonifying qi to produce blood, and Radix Rehmanniae Preparata tonifying blood and enriching yin; Rhizoma Atractylodis Macrocephalae and Radix Angelicae Sinensis serve as the assistant herbs to tonifying qi and strengthening the spleen, and tonifying blood and harmonizing blood. Poria, Radix Paeoniae Alba, Rhizoma Chuanxiong, and Radix et Rhizoma Glycyrrhizae Praeparata are used as adjuvant and guiding herbs to promote qi circulation and regulate harmony, so as to assist the production of qi and blood. While greatly tonifying, attention should be paid to adding qi-regulating drugs to prevent excessive greasiness from hindering blood circulation and causing blood stasis syndrome.

In the treatment of postpartum depression, Professor Wu Quansheng proposed the “blood-vessel-heart-spirit” holistic view for diagnosis and treatment [11], and further analyzed that blood in the function of the viscera is mainly for the source of production, blood filling, and nourishing the whole body. For postpartum patients whose lochia has been cleared but qi and blood are still deficient, the treatment principle of “benefiting essence to help the five internal organs brighten” is selected, and a self-made Huangqi warming and tonifying formula is used to benefit essence and nourish blood, and harmonize the five internal organs. In the formula, Radix Astragali, Angelica sinensis, Radix Codonopsis, Atractylodes macrocephala and other qi-tonifying and blood-tonifying products are selected, and Lycium barbarum, Cornu Cervi Pantotrichum, salted Radix Morindae Officinalis, and Radix Dipsaci are also used to enrich and tonify the liver and kidney,

benefit essence and fill marrow to help the mutual generation of essence and blood to nourish the heart and spirit. The whole formula nourishes blood and promotes blood circulation in parallel, benefits essence and tonifies the kidney together, and uses sweet and warm to regulate and tonify qi and blood. When blood and qi are strong, the spirit will be peaceful, and when the spirit is peaceful, depression will be relieved.

As a representative prescription for tonifying qi to produce blood, the decoction of Tang-kuei and Astragalus can be selected for postpartum medication, and the medication can be added or subtracted according to clinical symptoms. Postpartum women often have blood stasis, so Rhizoma Chuanxiong, Salvia miltiorrhiza, and Herba Leonuri and other blood-activating products can be added to tonifying blood to avoid greasy retention of stasis. Postpartum lesions are inseparable from the effect of qi and blood. Qi and blood are interdependent. Qi deficiency weakens the function of promoting and consolidating, while blood deficiency weakens the function of nourishing and moisturizing, which becomes the root of various postpartum diseases. Tonifying qi and nourishing blood is an important choice for postpartum treatment.

5.2 Activating Blood and Resolving Stasis Takes Promoting Qi as the Core

“Fu Qingzhu’s Gynecology” says that “postpartum depression injures the liver, leading to the failure of lochia to discharge”, which means that postpartum emotional depression, liver dysfunction, and poor circulation of qi and blood can lead to blood stasis; The main pathogenesis of postpartum headache is “pain if not nourished, pain if not unobstructed”. The so-called unobstructed means that blood stasis blocks the blood flow, and the blood flow is not smooth, resulting in pain; Postpartum blood deficiency leads to qi deficiency, and qi deficiency leads to weakness in promoting blood circulation. If blood does not circulate, it will cause stasis. New stasis can cause pain, and long-term stasis can cause stagnation; Postpartum women often have blood stasis, and the core of treatment is to activate blood and resolve stasis to promote qi. When qi flows, blood stasis flows, and when blood stasis is not stagnant, the stagnation of qi disappears and the pain is relieved; A clinical randomized trial showed [12] that for postpartum depression patients with qi deficiency, blood deficiency and blood stasis, the effective rate of the treatment group using the Sengui-Ren mixture reached 92.6%. After treatment, postpartum mood swings and dizziness can be significantly improved; Clinically, Tongqiao Huoxue Decoction, Taohong Siwu Decoction and other blood-activating agents are often used for headache of blood stasis blocking collaterals. In the prescription, Semen Persicae, Flos Carthami, Radix Paeoniae Rubra, Rhizoma Chuanxiong and other traditional Chinese medicines can play a role in treating migraine by improving cerebral blood circulation, anti-inflammatory and analgesic effects, anti-oxidative stress, regulating neurotransmitters, and protecting brain nerves [13], and migraine is the most common type of postpartum headache. “Jingyue Quanshu. Gynecology” says, “Postpartum abdominal pain should be distinguished between deficiency and reality.”

If pain occurs due to blood stasis, Shi Xiao San Powder and

Sheng Hua Tang Decoction should be the primary choices.” Sheng Hua Tang Decoction, as a classic postpartum formula for activating blood and resolving stasis, can dissipate blood stasis, promote the flow of qi and blood, and thus relieve pain through activating blood and resolving stasis, with the overall principle of “dispelling stasis to promote blood production,” embodying elimination containing reinforcement. In summary, for postpartum headache patients with depression, activating blood and resolving stasis should be the primary approach. When blood stasis is resolved, the flow of qi will be smooth, and yin, yang, qi, and blood will be harmonized. It can be said that activating blood and resolving stasis to promote qi circulation is the core of treating postpartum diseases.

5.3 Soothing the Liver and Regulating Qi to Stop Pain is the Key

For the clinical treatment of postpartum depression, the primary and crucial step is soothing the liver and regulating qi. From the perspective of traditional Chinese medicine, women are considered to have the liver as their innate foundation and blood as their essence. The liver stores blood, and blood relies on the promotion, consolidation, and ascending functions of qi, while qi also relies on the nourishing effect of blood. During childbirth, qi and blood are damaged, leading to deficiency of yin and blood, malnutrition of the internal organs, impaired liver function in regulating and dispersing, and stagnation of qi, which then leads to postpartum depression. In severe cases, it can even damage the mind. Prolonged stagnation can obstruct the brain orifices, leading to headaches. When postpartum depression and headaches occur simultaneously, the primary treatment is to greatly tonifying qi and blood, restoring yang and consolidating the pulse, combined with activating blood and resolving stasis to stop pain. However, soothing the liver and regulating qi, and awakening the brain and opening the orifices are indispensable parts of the treatment. Clinically, formulas such as Chaihu Shugan San Powder and Xiaoyao San Powder, which soothe the liver and regulate qi, are often chosen for treating postpartum depression. Academician Shi Xuemin’s “awakening the brain and opening the orifices” acupuncture method has shown good results in clinical treatment of postpartum depression [14]. The “awakening the brain and opening the orifices” acupuncture method selects acupoints such as Shangxing (GV23), Sishencong (EX-HN1), Sanyinjiao (SP6), Shenmen (HT7), Renzhong (GV26), Neiguan (PC6), and Baihui (GV20). Among them, Shenmen (HT7) and Neiguan (PC6) can calm the mind and soothe the nerves, regulating qi to stop pain, and are mainly used to treat symptoms such as restlessness, palpitation, dysphoria, and pain. Sanyinjiao (SP6), as the meeting point of the three foot yin meridians of the liver, spleen, and kidney, is also a place where qi and blood converge. For patients with deficiency of both qi and blood after childbirth, it can tonify the liver and benefit the marrow, enriching yin and replenishing blood. Sishencong (EX-HN1), Renzhong (GV26), Shangxing (GV23), and Baihui (GV20) are all located on the head, which can not only soothe and regulate qi and blood to promote qi circulation, but also awaken the brain and open the orifices to stop pain. Among them, acupoints such as Sishencong (EX-HN1), Baihui (GV20), and Neiguan (PC6) are also mutually beneficial for treating postpartum headaches.

There are medical records selecting Baihui (GV20) and Sishencong (EX-HN1) points for acupuncture and moxibustion to treat postpartum headache, and the headache gradually relieved and recovered after 4 treatments [15]. The mind-awakening and resuscitation acupuncture method implies soothing the liver in regulating qi, enriching yin in tonifying and replenishing qi and blood, and relieving pain in awakening the mind and resuscitation. All effects work together to treat postpartum depression, and it can also be used for postpartum headache. It can be said that soothing the liver and regulating qi to relieve pain is the key to treating postpartum headache with depression, which connects the relationship between qi and blood and the flow of qi. In clinical treatment, methods of tonifying blood and qi are often combined with agents for relieving depression and pain, and awakening the mind and resuscitation.

6. Conclusion

Postpartum women are deficient in primordial qi and qi and blood, coupled with poor rest, overwork, and decreased hormone levels, which often affect the emotions of the lying-in woman, and may also lead to sequelae such as migraine, sleep disorders, and category of consumptive disease due to various diseases during the puerperium. This has adverse effects on both the lying-in woman and the child. The author discusses postpartum headache with depression from the perspective of “blood is the mother of qi”, aiming to clarify the importance of “blood” in postpartum diseases. Qi and blood complement each other, one yin and one yang, regulating and harmonizing the nutrient and defense, and nourishing the viscera. Therefore, in the treatment of postpartum diseases, tonifying blood should be the primary task, combined with soothing the liver and regulating qi, strengthening the spleen and tonifying qi, and calming the mind and spirit; following the holistic dialectical thinking of traditional Chinese medicine, referring to clinical practice, and adding or subtracting according to the syndrome.

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