

# Traditional Health Practices Concerning Pregnancy, Birth, and the Postpartum Period of Women Giving Birth in the Hospital

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## ABSTRACT

**Objective:** This study was conducted to investigate traditional beliefs and practices of women regarding care of the mother and the infant during pregnancy, in childbirth, and in the postpartum period.

**Methods:** This was a descriptive, cross-sectional study conducted at a public hospital in Istanbul. The data collected consisted of socio-demographic and obstetric characteristics, and responses to questions about some traditional customs regarding pregnancy, delivery, and the postpartum period.

**Results:** In our research, some non-harmful cultural practices were found, such as the belief that to have a clever and beautiful baby the mother should eat fruit; that to have a healthy and peaceful pregnancy, the mother should not look upon ugly things; the mother should indulge her food cravings; and to have an easy birth, the mother should walk and focus on prayers. On the other hand, we also found beliefs that could be harmful, such as wiping the mouth of a baby with a date before breastfeeding, and practices believed to be protective that could cause harm, such as putting a knife under the baby's bed, fastening a safety pin to the baby's clothes, and for the mother and child to remain at home for 40 days.

**Conclusion:** While non-harmful and beneficial practices related to maternal and infant health should be accepted and supported as a part of our cultural richness, practices that could be harmful should be prevented in pregnancy classes or with training upon hospital discharge.

## INTRODUCTION

The human instinct to protect life has led to the emergence of various beliefs and customs concerning health, dating back to the time of primitive tribes. These beliefs have been transferred from generation to generation as a component of the social and cultural structure, despite innovations in science and technology. Traditional health practices are observed in every region of the world with varying frequency.<sup>[1]</sup>

Pregnancy and giving birth is an important transitional period in life, and because of this characteristic, it has been the source of many traditional beliefs and rituals throughout history in every cultural environment.<sup>[2,3]</sup> Health workers' knowledge of traditional practices can play an important role in the protection and improvement of the health of the child and the mother.<sup>[3]</sup>

Some traditional practices can delay the diagnosis of dis-

ease and have a direct adverse effect on the individual's health status. For example, if a postnatal infection manifesting with a high fever and delirium is assessed as the folk belief of seeing a demon in a nightmare and if, instead of seeking medical help, rituals such as bringing the woman to a clergyman to pray or burning incense are followed, the sick woman may lose her life. Similarly, waiting for 3 of the daily calls to prayer before breastfeeding the baby can induce hypoglycemia, and related problems may develop.<sup>[4]</sup>

Harmless traditional practices may have greater meaning for an individual than it might seem. Indeed, people continue to observe such practices not just because they are beliefs and traditions, but because they are meaningful to them. For example, women living in rural Zambia often do not want to deliver their babies in the hospital because traditional rituals performed with the placenta are not allowed there.<sup>[5]</sup> Studies performed in China have

demonstrated that women feel safer and more at ease when they can access both traditional and modern medical assistance.<sup>[6,7]</sup>

Knowledge of traditional beliefs and widely implemented social customs will enable the correction of those that might be harmful, and will increase the quality of care by recognizing harmless rituals with respect and understanding of the patient's beliefs.<sup>[8]</sup> When viewed from this perspective, improving women's health is directly related to being knowledgeable about traditional practices concerning pregnancy, birth, and the postpartum period. Sources related to improving the quality of obstetric healthcare emphasize the importance of providing care that is sensitive to a woman's cultural background.<sup>[9,10]</sup> When harmless customs are seen and esteemed as components of traditional richness, a mutual relationship between health workers and women based on trust and respect can be established more easily.

This study was performed with the goal of determining some of the traditional beliefs and practices observed by women related to maternal and neonatal care during pregnancy, birth, and the postnatal period.

## MATERIAL AND METHODS

A descriptive, cross-sectional survey was administered at a public hospital in the city of Istanbul. The study sample consisted of 1458 pregnant women who had no complications related to the pregnancy, who could speak and understand Turkish, and who agreed to participate in the research. Women who developed any complications, such as preeclampsia, premature birth, or who had complications after birth were excluded from the study as it might be difficult for them to respond to the questions. The data were collected using a form prepared by the investigators and face-to-face interviews that included questions concerning sociodemographic and obstetric characteristics and traditional practices. Open-ended questions about traditional customs observed were structured under 3 main titles related to pregnancy, birth and the postpartum period, and newborns. Before collecting the data, approval was granted by the Ethics Committee of Karabuk University. The data obtained from the study were evaluated using percentiles and frequency distributions.

## RESULTS

Of the total, 68.5% of the women interviewed were primary school graduates, and 85.8% of them were not employed. The women had a mean age of  $26.35 \pm 5.0$  years, and 24% of them did not benefit from any social security program. Most (73%) of the women were multiparous, and were born in the Marmara region, though the study

sample included women from all geographic regions of Turkey (Table 1).

### Practices during pregnancy

The study results revealed that 69.2% of the women surveyed believed in the evil eye, and that 33.3% carried a traditional protective talisman, 19.3% wore an amulet with a prayer inside, and 5.2% carried lentil or barley seeds, which are believed to provide protection (Table 2).

Of the study participants, 32.7% indicated that they did not believe in any traditional method of predicting the gender of the baby to be born, while 28% stated that women with a pointed or peaked belly would give birth to a male, and a woman with a rounded belly should expect to deliver a female baby. Furthermore, 23.9% said that pregnant women who were partial to eating sour foods would give birth to a girl, while those who preferred sweets would have a boy. "Eat sweet, deliver a cavalryman; eat sour, deliver Ayse (a girl's name)" is a frequently heard rhyming saying in Turkey. Other beliefs related to the gender of the child were (1) if the

**Table 1.** Sociodemographic and obstetric characteristics of the women

	n	%
Educational level		
Illiterate	96	6.6
Primary education	999	68.5
High school	306	21.0
University and above	57	3.9
Employment status		
Not employed	1251	85.8
Employed	207	14.2
Birthplace (region)		
Marmara	570	39.1
Aegean	261	17.9
Black Sea	189	13.0
Mediterranean	51	3.5
Eastern Anatolia	198	13.6
Central Anatolia	138	9.5
Southeastern Anatolia	51	3.5
Social security coverage		
Present	1107	75.9
Absent	351	24.1
Parity		
Nulliparous	540	37.0
Multiparous	918	73.0
Total	1458	100

**Table 2.** Distribution of prenatal traditional practices and beliefs

Traditional practices and beliefs	n	%	Traditional practices and beliefs	n	%
Protection from the evil eye			For an intelligent baby		
Nothing	435	29.8	Nothing	837	57.4
Evil eye talisman	486	33.3	Eat brains	228	15.6
Carrying barley, lentils	75	5.2	Eat copious amounts of fruit	267	18.3
Wearing an amulet	282	19.3	Bury the umbilical cord in a school garden	123	8.4
Prayer	180	12.3	Eat dried fruits and nuts	3	0.2
Gender assignment			For a good-natured baby		
Nothing	477	32.7	Nothing	768	52.7
Pointed belly predicts a male child, and round belly, female	408	28.0	Have a good-tempered person spit lightly on the baby's mouth	174	11.9
Eating sweets leads to a male child, and sour foods, female	348	23.9	Bury the umbilical cord in a mosque courtyard	114	7.8
If the pregnant woman becomes prettier, male, and if less attractive, female	69	4.7	Rub the baby's mouth with a date	243	16.7
If the pregnant woman sits on a mattress with a hidden knife, the child will be male, and if scissors, female	24	1.6	Be calm during the pregnancy	78	5.3
If her belly becomes very large, the child will be male, if hips, female	57	3.9	Refrain from committing sin	6	0.4
If mask of pregnancy develops, the child will be female	15	1.1	Pray	75	5.1
If a wedding ring on a string swings back and forth over the belly, the child will be male, if in a circle, female	21	1.4	Things to avoid during pregnancy		
If the fetus moves to the left, the child will be male, to the right, female	39	2.7	Nothing	651	44.7
For a pretty baby			Do not eat liver	162	11.1
Nothing	441	30.2	Do not look at some animals (rabbit, snake, monkey, etc.)	415	28.5
Look at the moon	171	11.7	Do not touch liver or uncooked meat	40	2.7
Look at pretty people	492	33.7	Do not eat something in secret	69	4.7
Eat quince	321	22.0	Do not cut your hair	63	4.3
Do not look at ugly objects or people	33	2.3	Do not smell a rose	51	3.5
			Do not attend a funeral or look at a corpse	7	0.5
			Other traditional practices		
			None	200	13.7
			Satisfying the pregnant woman's food cravings	1206	82.7
			Being generous to ensure smooth labor and delivery	52	3.6
			Total	1458	100

woman becomes prettier during the pregnancy, she will give birth to a boy, while if she is considered to become less attractive, it will be a girl (4.7%); (2) If she develops the mask of pregnancy (melasma), the baby will be a girl (1.1%); (3) If her belly becomes particularly large, the child is male, while if her hips become larger, a female child will be born (3.9%); (4) if a wedding ring on a string held over the belly of the pregnant woman swings back and forth, the baby will be a boy, and if it goes in a circle, then a girl will be born (1.4%); (5) if the pregnant woman sits on a mattress with scissors hidden underneath, then she will deliver a baby girl, and if the mattress has a knife

underneath, then she will have a boy (1.6%); and (6) if the fetus moves to the right in the mother's womb, it is a female, while if it moves to the left, it is a male (2.7%) (Table 2).

In addition, study participants reported that looking at pretty people (33.7%), at the moon (11.7%), and eating quince (22%) will ensure the birth of a pretty baby, and that pregnant women should not look at ugly people, animals, or objects (2.3%).

For an intelligent baby, it was said that pregnant women should eat brains (15.6%) and a lot of fruit (18.3%), and to

bury the umbilical cord in a school garden.

Some traditional practices aim to ensure that the child is good-natured. Most (52.7%) of the women who participated in the survey did not believe in any traditional practice for this purpose, but some responded that rubbing the baby's mouth with a date (16.7%), having a good-tempered individual lightly spit on the baby's mouth (11.9%), burying the umbilical cord in a mosque courtyard (7.8%), having a quiet and peaceful pregnancy (5.3%), and praying (5.1%) could be beneficial.

When asked, "What else should be paid attention to?" 28.5% of the participants replied that pregnant women should not look at some particular animals." The traditional belief is that pregnant women should not look at monkeys if they don't want to have a hairy baby, or at a snake if they don't want to give a birth to a traitor, or at a pig if they don't want to have a stubborn child. In addition, 11.1% believed that pregnant women should not eat liver, otherwise the baby will be born with a mark on the skin, and 4.7% also held the belief that if a pregnant woman eats stolen food, the baby will be born with a birthmark resembling the stolen food. Other traditions reported included the mother refraining from cutting her hair so as to lengthen the child's life (4.3%), avoiding smelling a rose so as to prevent the formation of a rose-shaped spot on the baby's body (3.5%), and not looking at a corpse or attending funerals (0.5%) (Table 2).

Additional beliefs were the importance of satisfying a pregnant woman's food cravings, held by 82.7% of the study group, and 3.6% believed that a pregnant woman should be generous and kind so as to deliver the baby without difficulty (Table 2).

### Traditional practices related to birth and the postnatal period

The women surveyed were asked "What beliefs and customs will ensure a smooth labor and delivery?" In all, 30.9% believed that prayer would help; 11.7% said frequent walks during the pregnancy; 10.7% responded that having a woman who had experienced a smooth birth rub the back of the pregnant women; 5.8% thought unfastening the woman's hair, and unlocking a door or opening windows would assist; and 2.9% added drinking olive oil. In addition, drinking water from the hand of a woman who had experienced an easy delivery or being given her blessing, firing a gun, and the pregnant woman feeding the birds from her skirt were other practices believed to facilitate the labor and delivery (Table 3).

Some (38.5%) of the women who participated in the study indicated that they didn't believe in stories of demonic nightmares and supernatural kidnapping, while some (36.0%) were uncertain. Traditional practices believed to provide protection from evil forces included not leav-

ing the woman alone and keeping the lights on when she sleeps (36.0%), placing a Koran by her bedside (13.4%), placing a knife under the baby's bed or fastening a safety pin to the baby's clothes (7.4%), wrapping red and black string around the bed of the woman and child (3.1%), putting garlic and onions near the bed (0.8%), and not leaving the baby's clothes outside at night (0.8%) (Table 3).

**Table 3.** Distribution of traditional practices related to delivery and the postnatal period

	n	%
Traditional practices		
Nothing	478	32.6
Prayer	450	30.9
A woman who experienced an easy delivery rubbing the pregnant woman's back	156	10.7
Unfastening the pregnant woman's hair, unlocking a door or opening a window	84	5.8
Firing a gun	9	0.6
Drinking water from the hand of a woman who experienced an easy delivery	32	2.2
Receiving the blessing of a woman who experienced an easy delivery	27	1.9
The pregnant woman feeding the birds from her skirt	10	0.7
Taking frequent walks during the pregnancy	171	11.7
Drinking olive oil	43	2.9
Protection from evil spirits		
Nothing	561	38.5
Placing a Koran by the bed of the new mother	195	13.4
Placing onions, garlic by the bed of the new mother	12	0.8
Wrapping the bed of the mother and baby with red and black string	45	3.1
Not leaving the new mother alone, leaving the lights on	525	36.0
Putting a knife under the cradle, putting a safety pin on the baby's clothes	108	7.4
Not leaving the baby's clothes outside at night	12	0.8
Protection during the 40-day postpartum period		
Nothing	561	38.5
Stay at home for 40 days after the birth	711	48.7
Not meeting with new mothers and babies for 40 days after the birth	186	12.7
Total	1458	100

**Table 4.** Distribution of traditional practices related to newborns

Traditional practices	n	%
Beliefs related to the 40-day postpartum period		
None	294	20.2
Throwing 40 stones, beans, pieces of gold, legumes into the bath water of the baby	1085	74.4
Taking the baby on home visits only once 40 days had passed since the birth	79	5.4
The umbilical cord		
None	291	20.0
Bury it in a school garden that the child be educated	444	30.5
Bury it in a mosque courtyard that the child be religious	375	25.7
Throw it into water that the child seek his/her destiny elsewhere	150	10.3
Keep it at home that the child stay close by	186	12.8
Throw it onto the roof for fast growth	12	0.8
Naming the baby		
None	527	36.1
Reciting the call to prayer in the baby's ear	931	63.9
Before breastfeeding		
None	1218	83.5
Reciting the call to prayer in the baby's ear	129	8.8
Feeding the baby sugared water	9	0.6
Rubbing honey or sugar on the baby's mouth or the mother's breast	24	1.6
Waiting until the third daily prayer	12	0.8
The mother performs ablutions	36	2.5
Rubbing onion on the mother's breast	30	2.1
Other		
None	369	25.3
The new mother should not drink water	33	2.3
Performing a religious ceremony on the 40 <sup>th</sup> day after the birth	432	29.6
Wrapping the baby in a yellow blanket to protect it from jaundice	408	28.0
Drinking a special drink for new mothers	147	10.1
Putting salt on the baby or washing it with salted water	69	4.7
Total	1458	100

Of traditions surrounding risks associated with the first 40 days after giving birth, 38.5% stated that they did not believe in the practice, while 48.7% indicated that the new mother

should not leave the house for 40 days, and 12.7% said that others should not meet with new mothers and newborns who have not completed the 40-day period (Table 3).

### Traditional practices related to newborns

In the survey, 74.4% of the women indicated that they will throw 40 stones or dried legumes into the baby's bath water before taking the child out for house calls, in observance of a tradition once the 40-day period is complete, while 5.4% of them replied that they will bathe their baby normally before they plan to make house calls (Table 4).

The women were asked what they planned to do with the dried umbilical cord and the responses were to bury it in a school garden to have an educated child (30.5%), in a mosque courtyard to rear a religious child (27.5%), throw it into water for the child to seek destiny elsewhere (10.35%), and keep it at home to keep the child close (12.8%) (Table 4).

Of the study participants, 36.1% indicated that they did not follow a special ritual when naming their children, while 63.9% of them stated that they recited the call to worship in the baby's ear before naming the child. The survey also asked about traditions surrounding breastfeeding. Most (83.5%) of the women indicated that they did not follow a special ritual before breastfeeding, while other responses included reciting the call to prayer in the baby's ears (8.8%), feeding the baby sugared water (0.6%), rubbing the baby's mouth or the mother's breast with honey or sugar (1.6%), waiting until after the third daily prayer (0.08%), the mother should perform ablutions prior to feeding (2.5%), and the mother should rub onion on her breast (2.1%). In the postpartum period, 2.3% of the participants believed that new mothers should refrain from drinking water, and 29.6% of them indicated that they would hold a traditional ceremony to welcome the child to the Muslim community 40 days after the birth. In addition, 28% said that they planned to wrap the baby in a yellow blanket to protect it from contracting jaundice, and 10.1% of them had drunk a special sorbet drink for new mothers, and 4.7% planned to wash their babies with salted water.

## DISCUSSION

The goals of observing traditional practices during pregnancy include predicting the gender of the baby to be born, ensuring that the child will be healthy and pretty, securing a comfortable, easy pregnancy, and preparing the pregnant woman for the delivery.<sup>[11]</sup>

Practices intended to provide protection against the evil eye reflect the desire for a problem-free pregnancy. The Turkish word for the evil eye is "nazar." It is of Arabic origin, and means to take a look, or a glance; however it is frequently used to refer to a glance of ill will. Certain in-

dividuals are believed to have the power to cause harm to others or damage their belongings, willingly or unwittingly, when they gaze at them with envy, excess pride, or even admiration.<sup>[12]</sup> In this society, women try to protect themselves from such evil looks with various sayings, wearing a talisman, blackening the face or some visible body parts of the child, wearing amulets with prayers inside, and carrying various minerals, glass, stones, or seeds and grains, such as black sesame seeds. In our study, 33.3% of the women wore a traditional protective blue bead, 19.3% wore an amulet, 5.2% carried barley or lentils, and 12.3% prayed to keep the evil eye away.

Çetinkaya et al.<sup>[13]</sup> performed a study to determine traditional practices performed related to the health of women during the postpartum period, and found that 75.8% pinned a bead onto the clothes of their baby as a protective talisman.

Uğurlu et al.<sup>[14]</sup> reported that 46.4% of the women in their study carried a talisman to protect themselves from the evil eye, while 29.6% of them prayed for the same reason. Our results regarding seeking protection from the evil eye during pregnancy were consistent with literature findings.

One of the things an expectant mother and her family wonder about is the gender of the fetus. Even though ultrasound is widely used in the field of obstetrics, in the earliest weeks of pregnancy when gender cannot yet be determined, some turn to traditional practices. The physical appearance of the pregnant woman, the foods she craves, and her behavior are at times used to predict the gender of the child. In this study, 32.7% of the women indicated that they did not believe in any traditional method, while 28% indicated that pregnant women with peaked bellies would have a boy and rounded bellies meant a baby girl. Cravings for sour food were also associated with a girl and a desire to eat sweets with a boy by 23.9% of the participants. "Eat sweet deliver a cavalryman, eat sour deliver Ayse" is a common phrase. In addition, 4.7% noted that a pregnant woman who is thought to get prettier during pregnancy is believed to be carrying a boy, while if the expectant mother is thought to become less attractive, the child will be a girl. Another belief reported by 1.1% was that developing the mask of pregnancy mask predicted the birth of a baby girl, and 3.9% thought that a particularly enlarged belly signified a boy, while enlarged hips meant the child would be a girl. Furthermore, 1.4% said that if a wedding ring on a string held over the woman's belly swings back and forth in a straight line she will deliver a baby boy, but if it goes in a circle then a baby girl will be born. We also found that 1.6% of the participants believed that if a pregnant woman sits on a mattress with scissors underneath she will have a girl, but if a knife is concealed under the mattress, then she will give birth to a boy. Only 2.7% thought that if the fetus moves to the right in her

mother's womb it is female, and if it moves to the left, it is male (Table 2).

Yalçın et al.<sup>[15]</sup> performed a study in the province of Karaman to investigate traditional practices concerning pregnancy, the postpartum stage, and child care, and, in contrast to our findings, they reported that participants believed that an expectant woman will deliver a baby girl if she is thought to become prettier during her pregnancy, and a baby boy if she is thought to become less attractive. Their results were similar to ours in the belief of some participants that a woman with a very enlarged belly will give birth to a boy, but if her hips become enlarged then a girl will be born. They also found that another belief that if when releasing her wedding ring held in the palm of her hand it falls to the right she will deliver a baby girl, and if it falls to the left, a baby boy will be born.

Our study results are thought to be related to the gender roles attributed to men and women in this society. Based on traditional gender roles, women are expected to be passive, flexible, soft, and silent, while men are to be tough, assertive, independent, and enterprising.<sup>[16]</sup> Furthermore, in patriarchal societies, a baby boy is met with greater joy and happiness. It may be that a pointed belly and a knife represent strong and assertive qualities, while the mother's craving for sweets and becoming more beautiful during pregnancy may be thought to be reflections of the favorable birth of a male child. The back and forth motion of the wedding ring on a string in a straight line might be related to the honest and righteous conduct thought to be a characteristic of men.

In our survey, 22% of the women thought that looking at beautiful objects, consuming certain fruits, and avoiding bad or ugly things during the pregnancy would mean having a prettier baby. According to the belief, looking at a monkey could lead to a hairy baby, looking at a rabbit could cause a cleft palate, a snake means the child could become a traitor, and a pig could lead to a stubborn child. Similarly, some thought that consuming brains and lots of fruit, and burying the umbilical cord in a school garden could increase the intelligence level of the child.

In a study performed by Karabulutlu et al.<sup>[17]</sup> in the province of Kars, the researchers found that 51.7% of their study population (total n=500) looked at pretty people and objects during pregnancy so as to have pretty babies. Qualitative study results reported by Erenoğlu et al.<sup>[18]</sup> also demonstrated that pregnant women reported eating apples or quince to have a pretty baby and avoided looking at some animals. Işık et al.<sup>[8]</sup> indicated that women had refrained from looking at monkeys, rabbits, and camels during pregnancy, and that they had not cut their hair or visited cemeteries, in the hope of ensuring a long life for their child.

These findings and our study results demonstrate that some women in our country observe beneficial traditional

customs and try to prevent pregnant women from looking at things that might be ugly, and potentially frightening, in an effort to ensure a peaceful, happy, and non-stressful pregnancy. We also found that 82.7% of the women surveyed believed that a pregnant woman should eat anything she craves, which is similar to literature reports. Given that study results suggest that mood of the expectant mother during pregnancy affects the baby, these efforts are extremely significant.<sup>[19-21]</sup>

Our study has also shown that some women believe in potentially harmful traditional practices, such as rubbing a date on their baby's mouth (n=243; 16.7%), and having someone spit lightly on the baby's mouth (n=174; 11.9%). Breastfeeding is important in the healthy formation of intestinal flora. Therefore, breast milk is best as the first source of nourishment, and babies should be fed with breast milk at least for 6 months after birth.<sup>[22]</sup> Exposure to foods such as dates, onions, and honey might adversely affect the developing digestive system of the baby. Numerous microorganisms present in the saliva of human beings could be a significant source of contamination and that particular practice has the risk of leading to infections such as hepatitis A, herpes simplex, and tuberculosis.<sup>[23-25]</sup> Pregnant women and their families must be informed about the potentially harmful effects of such customs.

Birth is a physiological event, but the process has always been surrounded by many social and cultural rituals. Traditional practices performed at the time of birth are generally intended to facilitate labor and delivery, and to relieve pain. In this survey, in response to the question "What are procedures you have believed in and applied to have a smooth delivery?" 30.9% of the participants said prayer, 11.7% replied that they went for walks during the pregnancy, 10.7% indicated that a woman whose delivery had been uneventful rubbing the pregnant woman's back was helpful, 5.8% said unfastening the expectant mother's hair and opening doors and windows, and 2.9% said drinking olive oil. Other beliefs thought to be beneficial included drinking water from the hands of a woman who had experienced a smooth labor, receiving her blessing, firing a gun, and feeding birds from the pregnant woman's skirt (Table 3).

Işık et al.<sup>[8]</sup> reported that 34.4% of study participants believed in having a pregnant woman walk or shaking her to encourage delivery, and 10.3% said having her climb stairs. The same study also mentioned traditional practices of quickly braiding and loosening the woman's hair, having her passing under the arm of a woman who had previously given birth, drinking water from her hands, and having a religious woman present nearby during labor.

Our findings concerning traditional rituals observed at the time of delivery are seen as harmless, and aimed at helping women to concentrate on the delivery, ease their

pain, and encourage belief in a smooth delivery. Massaging a pregnant woman's back during labor can increase her endorphin level, and walking is recommended by the World Health Organization as encouraging movement and good positioning of the baby.

In some regions of Anatolia, an evil spirit (djinn) is believed to sometimes appear to women after they have given birth, and frighten, sicken, or even kill them. Similar mystical forces that protect or harm women and children are encountered in many regions of the world, and different traditions have evolved to protect them from the adverse effects of supernatural powers.<sup>[26]</sup>

In our study, 38.5% of the women did not believe in evil nightmares, while 36% were hesitant. They reported using measures such as not leaving the woman alone and not turning the lights off. To protect a new mother, traditions such as putting a copy of the Koran near the bed (13.4%), placing a knife under the baby's bed, pinning a safety pin to the baby's clothes (7.4%), wrapping red and black string around the bed (3.1%), placing onions and garlic near the bed of the mother (0.8%), and not leaving the baby's clothes outside at night (0.8%).

In their study, Bakır et al.<sup>[27]</sup> determined that 44% of new mothers believed in evil nightmares and used such things as a red coverlet, a piece of metal, a Koran, amulets with prayers inside or pieces of paper with a prayer written on it. In our study, it was striking that women resorted to potentially harmful practices, such as placing a knife under the baby's bed, and using a safety pin on the baby's clothes, which could lead to an injury.

The period around giving birth is time of some vulnerability to illness and even death. In our culture, the first 40 days after birth is called "the forties." The importance of this period is emphasized with the saying, "The grave of the new mother remains open for 40 days." From a medical perspective, the first 6 weeks after birth is considered a risky period for the development of bleeding and infection.<sup>[28]</sup> In many cultures, women spend this time taking care of themselves and their babies. In our country, often the women are kept at home for 40 days, and housework is performed by close relatives. The same tradition also prevails in China, India, and Thailand.<sup>[4]</sup> Mothers and babies who get sick or die are thought to be the victims of evil spirits. To protect them, new mothers in Turkey are also often not permitted to meet with others during this period of 40 days.<sup>[3,15]</sup> Our study results resemble those in the literature. While meant to be helpful, these common practices, which limit the freedom and living space of women, may contribute to postpartum depression or a delay in seeking medical care if health problems emerge.

Ceremonial events are often performed for the woman and child 40 days after the birth, when the "evil spirits of the forties" are believed to go away. After 40 days, the

mother and baby return to their normal lives. The tradition is for the mother and her baby to take a bath together. At the end of the bath, 40 spoonfuls or a ladleful of clean water is poured into a container, and according to the practices prevailing in the region, 40 clean stones or legumes are added to the container. This liquid is then poured onto the heads of the mother and baby together. Finally, the mother and child make a visit. In that home, a piece of cotton is presented to the baby to wish him/her a long life until his/her hair turns gray. The baby is also gifted with a few pieces of cubed sugar to make him/her good-natured, and an egg is given as a gift to open the baby's destiny.<sup>[1,29]</sup> Most (74.4%) of our study participants indicated that they followed this ritual, while 5.4% said that they visited others after bathing as usual.

In our study, when asked about other traditional practices applied, 10.1% of the participants responded that they had a special sorbet drink for postpartum women thought to increase their milk, 2.3% of them indicated that they didn't drink water, and 4.7% responded that they put salt on the baby or bathed the baby with salted water. The nutrition of the mother during the postpartum period is important for the health of both the baby and the mother. During this time, food such as a special drink can have an important impact on increasing mothers' milk; however, excessive consumption may preclude a woman from losing weight gained during pregnancy.<sup>[4]</sup> Furthermore, putting salt on the baby or bathing it in salted water is harmful. Yet, this is very popular in our country.<sup>[15,30]</sup> Health professionals must raise greater awareness of the dangers of these customs.

We also found that traditions concerning feeding the baby were observed: 0.8% of the women waited for the third prayer of the day, 8.8% of them waited until they had recited the call to prayer to the baby before breastfeeding, and 1.6% of them rubbed honey or sugar on the mouth of the baby or the her breast.

Uğurlu et al.<sup>[14]</sup> and Çetinkaya et al.<sup>[13]</sup> found that 6.7% and 14.6%, respectively, of their study participants also waited until the third daily prayer. The smaller percentage of women in this category in our survey is attributed to breastfeeding training sessions provided by hospital staff who discourage this practice.

With regard to beliefs surrounding the umbilical cord, 30.5% of the women in this survey stated that they buried it in a school garden to ensure the child's education, and 27.5 % buried it in a mosque courtyard, seeking to rear a religious child. Only 10.3% threw the cord into water so as to see the child search out his/her destiny elsewhere, and 12.8% of them kept the umbilical cord at home to keep the child close by.

Yalçın et al.<sup>[15]</sup> reported that 31.2% of their female study participants buried the umbilical cord at or near their

home in the hope of keeping the child near them, while 51.7% responded that they believed that wherever the cord was buried reflected where the child would work in the future.

In the study conducted by Çetinkaya et al.,<sup>[13]</sup> it was reported that 43.9% of the women buried the umbilical cord in a mosque courtyard or in a school garden with the same hopes for the children's future. Our study results in this area were consistent with the literature. This traditional practice does not harm the mother or child, and is seen as a component of our culture.

## Conclusion

In our research, we found harmless traditions, such as mothers believing in eating fruit to have intelligent and pretty children, avoiding looking at ugly things so as to have a peaceful pregnancy, providing the pregnant woman with whatever food she craves, taking a walk in order to help deliver the baby without difficulty, concentrating on the birth by praying to God, and rubbing the expectant mother's back. On the other hand, such practices as rubbing the baby's mouth with a date, putting a knife under the baby's bed, attaching a safety pin to the baby's clothes, keeping the mother and baby at home for 40 days, and putting salt on the baby were determined to be harmful. It is recommended that harmless, acceptable or even potentially beneficial practices observed during pregnancy, birth, and the postnatal period be considered part of our cultural richness and supported, while harmful practices should be avoided with educational sessions provided in pregnancy classes and on hospital discharge.

### Ethics Committee Approval

The approval of the local Ethics Committee was obtained. (Date: 16.02.2015 Number: 2015/1)

### Informed Consent

Approval was obtained from the patients.

### Peer-review

Internally peer-reviewed.

### Authorship Contributions

Concept: N.K.; Design: N.K.; Data Collection&/or processing: N.K., R.A., D.Y.G.; Analysis and/or interpretation: N.K., A.R.B.; Literature search: N.K., R.A., D.Y.G., A.R.B., N.B.G.; Writing: N.K., R.A., D.Y.G., A.R.B., N.B.G.; Critical review: N.K., R.A., D.Y.G., A.R.B., N.B.G.

### Conflict of Interest

None declared.

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## Hastanede Doğum Yapan Kadınların Gebelik, Doğum ve Doğum Sonu Döneme İlişkin Geleneksel Uygulamaları

**Amaç:** İnsanoğlunun yaşama koruma içgüdüsü, ilkel kavimlerden bu yana sağlıkla ilgili konularda çeşitli inanç ve uygulamaların doğmasına yol açmıştır. Bu çalışma kadınların gebelik, doğum ve doğum sonrası dönemde anne-bebek bakımına yönelik geleneksel inanç ve uygulamalarını belirlemek amacıyla yapılmıştır.

**Gereç ve Yöntem:** Araştırma, İstanbul ilinde, bir kamu hastanesinde tanımlayıcı kesitsel tipte yapılmıştır. Veri toplama formu sosyo-demografik, obstetrik özellikler ile kadınların gebelik, doğum ve doğum sonu döneme ilişkin geleneksel uygulamalarına ilişkin sorulardan oluşmuştur. Veriler toplanmaya başlanmadan önce, etik kurul onayı ve kurum izni alınmıştır.

**Bulgular:** Araştırmamızda kadınların, bebek akıllı ve güzel olsun diye meyve yenmesi gerektiğine inanması, sağlıklı ve huzurlu bir gebelik geçirmek için çirkin şeylere bakmaması, canının çektiği her şeyin yedirilmesi, kolay doğum yapsın diye yürüyüş yaptırılması ve dua ederek odaklanması, sırtının sıvazlanması zararlı olmayan kültürel uygulamalar olarak değerlendirilmiştir. Buna karşılık, bebeğin ağzına emzirmeden önce hurma sürmek, kırk basmasından korumak için bebek yatağının altına bıçak koymak, kıyafetine çengelli iğne takmak ve 40 gün lohusa ve bebeğin evden çıkarılmaması, bebeğin tuzlanması zararlı uygulamalar olarak belirlenmiştir.

**Sonuç:** Gebelik, doğum ve doğum sonu kabul görmüş, anne ve bebek sağlığı üzerine zararı bulunmayan hatta faydası olabilecek uygulamaların, kültürel zenginliğimizin bir parçası olarak kabul edilip desteklenmesi, zararlı etkileri bulunan uygulamaların ise gerek gebelik okulları gerekse taburculuk sırasında yapılan eğitimlerle önlenmesi önerilmektedir.

**Anahtar Sözcükler:** Geleneksel uygulamalar; halk hekimliği; perinatal dönem.