



## AYURVEDA AND FEMALE REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH

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### ABSTRACT

Ayurvedic concept of 'A healthy progeny occurs from a healthy womb by the union of healthy sperm and ovum' is of great value in this era of rising infertility and menstrual disorders. According to ayurveda the predominance and various permutations of doshas (VATA, PITTA, KAPHA) bring out different bodily changes in different phases of a women's life. Based on these changes she is called by the terms *kanya*, *gowri*, *mugdha*, *athirooda*, *vridha*. Also there is description regarding dietetics and regimens that a women should follow in these different stages of ageing. Considering the concept of "prevention is better than cure", it will be better to restore health naturally with slight modification in life style. This article gives a brief idea about the various ayurvedic practices and concepts in specific epochs of women's life.

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## INTRODUCTION

Ayurveda is a holistic science that emphasis on measures 'to maintain the health of healthy and to improve the health of debilitated person'. It gives all information about each and every aspect of human life from birth to death. Rather than a medical science it is a social system that explains ways of better living. Life exists and species are maintained by the biological process of reproduction. Considering this aspect, ayurveda too has given great concern to the reproductive health of male and female.

According to the ayurvedic concept, our body is a combination of *doshas*, *dhatus* and *malas*<sup>1</sup>. Though all the three doshas - *Vata*, *Pitta* and *Kapha* are always present in the body, their relative predominance changes with different age. A proper interaction of doshas with dhatus and malas maintain the equilibrium of body. The basic age classification of *balya* (childhood), *madhyama* (youth) and *vridha* (old age) are also based on doshas<sup>2</sup>. Acharya Bhavamishra has mentioned the women as *bala* (upto 16yrs), *taruni* (17yrs-32yrs), *adhiruda* (33yrs-50yrs) and *vridha* (after 50 yrs) considering the different epochs in her life span<sup>3</sup>. Human beings are considered as the microcosm of the universe i.e. the macrocosm<sup>4</sup>. So considering this ayurvedic principle, most of the changes that happens in body with respect to ageing can be well managed with external supplements of similar panchamahabhootha constitution. Ayurvedic science provides timely advice for women regarding her diet and regimen so that she can manage the status of doshas in different epochs of

life. Menstrual irregularities, infertility, prenatal issues, postnatal complications, benign and malignant conditions of female reproductive system etc are rising day by day. So better care and awareness regarding female health is of prime importance and in this article some of the common ayurvedic advices and practices considering the female health are being discussed.

### Menarche and Menstruation

According to ayurvedic science a girl attains menarche by the age of 12 yrs<sup>5</sup>. *Balya avastha* (0yrs-12yrs) is described as a period of *Kapha* predominance<sup>6</sup>. From the period of 12yrs and above the *Pitta dosha* starts to dominate and under this effect *janmottara kala bhavas* (secondary sexual characters) are developed and a girl attains menarche. She is then called by the term *rajaswala* on attaining menstruation. *Acharyas* use different terms like *rajas*, *arthava*, *shonitha*, *pushpa* etc to denote menstrual blood/ovum /secondary oocyte/ functioning ovary based on the context concerned. There is difference in opinion among classics regarding the days of menstruation. Some says the duration as 3 days<sup>7</sup>, some as 5 days<sup>8</sup> while others consider it 3, 5, or 7 days<sup>9</sup>. But all classics consider the inter menstrual period as one month<sup>10,11</sup>. During the period of menstruation, she is advised to stay separately, to follow light food like those prepared from milk, barley etc, not to take head bath for initial 3 days and to avoid sexual intercourse<sup>12</sup>. In cases of delay in attaining puberty and menstruation, it is advised to include *tila*(Sesame), *kulatha*(*Dolichus biflorus*), *matsya*(fish)etc in daily food so that the *kapha* dominance can be reduced by initiating proper *pitta* functioning<sup>13</sup>.

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### Menstrual and Other Gynaecological Disorders

The *arthava dushti* (menstrual disorders), based on *dosha* involvement are said to be eight in number<sup>14</sup>. Specific management of each one based on doshas are well explained in all classics. The gynecological disorders are described under the heading *yonivyapat/guhya rogas* irrespective of their menstrual pattern. *Mithyopachara* (Improper food and activities), *pradushta arthava* (menstrual abnormalities), *beeja dosha* (ovum/sperm/embryo related abnormalities), *daiva* (previous life deeds are considered as the main causative factors for *yonivyapat*<sup>15</sup>. Vagbhata also added *apadravyas* (instruments or other materials for sexual pleasure) as one among the cause. 20 such *yonivyapats* are explained in the classics with specific treatment modalities for each. *Bandha* (a type of bandaging) and *veshavara* advised for the treatment of *mahayoni yonivyapat* (uterine prolapse) is one such practice<sup>16</sup>. *Vandhyata*<sup>17</sup> and *Asrigdhara*<sup>18</sup> are the two entities described in ayurveda to include the cases of infertility and abnormal uterine bleeding.

### Age for Marriage and Conception

In general, Ayurvedic science consider the reproductive period of a female from 12 Yrs -50Yrs<sup>19</sup>. The minimum age for conception by a female is told as 16Yrs<sup>20,21</sup>. Marriage among male and female of *athulya gotra* (different family) is considered better<sup>22</sup>. Samgrahakara consider 21yrs for male and 12 yrs for female as the ideal marriageable age<sup>23</sup>. The better age for conception as explained in Ashtanaga Samgraha is 25 yrs for male and 16 yrs for female<sup>24</sup>. In Ashtanga Hridaya the best period for conception is told as 16yrs for female and 20yrs for male<sup>25</sup>.

### Preconceptional Care

*Athulya gotreeyam* is a chapter in Charaka Samhitha that explains in detail about qualities of women to be selected as a partner. Very young women, old women, women with structural deformities, families with disease inheritance etc are considered unsuitable for impregnation<sup>26</sup>. The *pumsavana* practices were done mainly with the intention of begetting a healthy child, for proper embryological development and to maintain *garbha*<sup>27</sup>. Acharya Vagbhata clearly mention the importance of *shudhatha* of *shukra*, *arthava*, *garbhashaya*, *garbhashaya marga* and *hridaya* in the achievement of proper conception<sup>28</sup>. Ayurveda insist females to follow certain regimen after menstruation also. Head bath is advised from 4<sup>th</sup> day of menstruation only<sup>29</sup>. The women desiring conception is advised to have sexual relation from 4<sup>th</sup> day onwards after performing prayers<sup>30</sup>. Ayurveda gives great concern to the psychological status of the women, as it has an influence on the character, attitude and on the gender of the child to be born<sup>31</sup>. *Panchamahabhuthas* are considered as one among the base required for the formation of a *garbha*. Each one among the *panchamahabhuthas* play their own specific role in fetal development<sup>32</sup>. So the preconceptional care and pregnancy care is done considering the principle of *loka purusha sidhanta*. For preconceptional care, it is advised to use drugs like *ksheera* (milk), *ghritha* (ghee), *lakshmana()*, *masha* (phaseolus mungo) etc either in *pana* (drinking form) or as *nasya* (nasal drops)<sup>33</sup>. Along with milk, internal medication, purificatory therapies and *basti karmas* (*panchakarma* therapies) are also advised before planning conception to improve the quality of *bija* (ovum)<sup>34</sup>. The women is insisted to add *tila* (sesame), *masha* (phaseolus mungo) like food in her

diet during preconception<sup>35</sup>. There is explanation regarding *maithuna* (sexual intercourse), postures and contraindications for *maithuna* with respect to seasons<sup>36</sup>.

### Pregnancy Care

The signs of pregnancy are described under the heading *sadhyo griheetha garbha lakshana* and *vyaktha garbha lakshana*. *Shukra adhikya* results in male progeny and *arthava adhikatha* leads to female progeny is the concept regarding the gender<sup>37</sup>. On confirming pregnancy, women is advised to include *navanitha* (butter), *ghritha* (ghee), *ksheera* (milk) in her diet daily<sup>38</sup>. She is told to follow the advices of experienced women and to restrain from *garbha upaghatakara bhavas* (various situations hampering pregnancy) like in order to avoid miscarriages<sup>39</sup>. *Bahu pathyatha* (multiple pregnancy) is considered as the result of action of *vayu* on the *bija*<sup>40</sup>. The organogenesis told by Acharya Susruta clearly explains the *dosha dhatu* combination required for the genesis of each and every part of the body<sup>41</sup>.

There is elaborate description regarding monthly regimen of pregnant women (*masanumasika garbhini paricharya*), the use of *anupasamskritha ksheera* (unprocessed milk) in 1<sup>st</sup> month<sup>42</sup>, *gokshuradi* drugs in the 6<sup>th</sup> month<sup>43</sup> are two such examples. The pica of pregnancy is described under the heading *douhrida*. Natural remedies for pregnancy ailments are well described in Kashyapa Samhitha. The use of *laja manda* (clear liquid made of rice flakes) in pregnancy vomiting<sup>44</sup>, *matra basti* (a type of lubricating enema) in constipation of pregnant women are some good examples<sup>45</sup>. It is indicated to use butter prepared with *chandana*, *usheera* etc in the form of paste during 7<sup>th</sup> month to relieve *kikkisa* (striae gravidarum)<sup>46</sup>. The use of *thaila* in the form of external application and as a tamponade to lubricate the vagina helps to ease the normal process of delivery<sup>47</sup>. *Apana vayu* is the main initiating factor for normal delivery as *garbha nishkramana* (expelling the fetus) is one among the normal functions of *vata*<sup>48</sup>. So procedures and medicines to normalize *vata* are given to the women throughout the gestational period.

The internal medicines and external applications to avoid *garbha srava* (abortions before 3<sup>rd</sup> month) and methods to manage *garbha paatha* (abortions after 4<sup>th</sup> month) are also well explained in the classics. The explanations of *garbha shosha* seems similar to the conditions of oligohydramnios/IUGR. By the beginning of 9<sup>th</sup> month the women is advised to shift to a separate house *soothika graham*, fully furnished for her and the to be born baby with materials to assist in the delivery and to use for other post natal care<sup>49</sup>. Descriptions regarding the stages of labor as *upasthitha prasava*<sup>50</sup>, *prajanana kala*<sup>51</sup>, *parivartita garbha*<sup>52</sup> (are also well told in the classics. Placenta, amniotic fluid and labor pain are represented by the terms *apara*, *garbhodaka* and *avi*. For a woman in labor, powder of herbal drugs *kshta*, *ela*, *vacha*, *chitraka* etc are prescribed for inhalation, *abhyanga* (massage) with *koshna thaila* (Luke warm oil) in lower abdomen, mild yawning and walking are also advised<sup>53</sup>. Delayed labor and placenta expulsion are represented by the term *garbha sangha* and *apara pathana*. Various fumigations, local applications and *basti* procedures are recommended in such conditions. Obstructed labor is described under *mooda garbha* and the abnormal fetal presentations are enumerated under *kheela*, *prathikura*, *bija*, *parigha* and other *gati*'s<sup>54</sup>. *Mooda garbha* is one among the area in ayurveda utilizing *shastra karma*

(surgical procedures) for management purpose. Ingesting food is contraindicated before *mooda garbha sastra karma*<sup>55</sup> (susrutha sutra sthana 5<sup>th</sup> chapter, 16<sup>th</sup> sloka). There are references regarding *udara paatana* in the region of *basti dwara* (incision in supra pubic region) to take out the live fetus<sup>56</sup> (ashtanga samgraha sharira 4<sup>th</sup> chapter 52<sup>nd</sup> sloka). Kashyapa Samhitha provides maximum details regarding features indicating intrauterine death of the fetus<sup>57</sup>. Acharya Susrutha consider a gap of 6 years between two consecutive pregnancies as ideal<sup>58</sup>.

### Post Natal Care

*Soothika* is the term used for women in post natal period<sup>59</sup>. The time period of *soothika kala* starts from the delivery of placenta to a minimum of 45 days<sup>60</sup> or to a maximum of 6 months<sup>61</sup>. The post partum pain is described as *Makkala shoola*<sup>62</sup>. In the initial day's light food with little oil is advised to stimulate the digestive fire as well as to normalize the vitiated *vata dosha*<sup>63</sup>. The use of non vegetarian food is allowed only after 12 days of delivery<sup>64</sup>. The food prescribed during *soothika kala* includes *Vidaryadi varga* which nourishes the mother and also act as galactagogue<sup>65</sup>. The use of cloth for abdominal binding after delivery is also explained in classics<sup>66</sup>. A strict restriction in diet and activities should be followed for 1 month and after that she should return back to her normal activities very slowly<sup>67</sup>. Herbal drugs to improve the quality (*sthanya shodhaka*) and quantity (*sthanya janana*) of breast milk are also described in classics. Diseases related to breast and different types of breast milk abnormalities are also described in relation to *soothika* under *sthana roga* and *sthanya roga*. Kashyapa Samhitha explains in detail about 35, 64 *soothika vyadhis* under two separate chapters.

### Menopause

During the later stages of reproductive period, the predominance of *pitta dosha* gets gradually reduced and *vata dosha* starts to dominate<sup>68</sup>. It is due to this transformation various changes are noted in the menstrual pattern during the premenopausal period. The women attains menopause when there is more *vata dosha* (associated with *dhathu* depletion due to aging) and the formation of *arthava* from *raktha dhathu* is stopped. So the use milk preparations with herbal drugs like *Shatavari*, *Chandana*, *Usheera* etc told in classics had been found useful in hot flushes, psychological disturbances etc associated with menopause.

### Genetic View Points

In Charaka Samhitha, Acharya comments that an impaired *beeja*, *beejabhaga* and *beeja bhaga avayava* produces corresponding defect in the *anga* and *avayavas* of the to be born child<sup>69</sup>. Structural and psychological factors determining the sex are explained under the heading of *strikara bhavas* (female characteristics), *purushakara bhavas* (male characteristics) and *napumsakara bhavas* (characteristics of hermaphrodite)<sup>70</sup>. *Shukra bahulya* is considered as the factor responsible for male child and *arthava adhikatha* as the factor for female child<sup>71</sup>. All other conditions will lead to the birth of *napumsaka*. The concept of *shad bhavas* (*matruja*, *pitruja*, *satvaja*, *sathmyaja*, *rasja*, *athmaja*) explains very clearly about the familial inheritance of different features in a *garbha*<sup>72</sup>.

## DISCUSSION

Ayurveda is a science that mingle with the nature and use nature's own resources to treat human ailments. A female can make use of the instructions told in this science to have a better reproductive period with less medical assistance. The entire reproductive period of 34Yrs(16yrs-50yrs) when divided into two, gives a first half with better reproductive potential and a second half where the reproductive system functions to help the women in leading a healthy personal and family life by providing proper hormonal support. The functioning of the HPO axis can be assessed from the nature of menstrual cycle. A woman desiring a good progeny therefore should give prime concern to her physical and psychological aspects from the age of menarche onwards. The proper HPO axis is the base for a normal reproductive function. This axis is always vulnerable to the influences from higher centre's, neuro transmitters, modulators etc. Ayurveda insist females to follow certain menstrual regimens before, during and after menstruation. From the basic principles of Ayurveda it is understood that *Pitta dosha* is more related to the hormonal mechanisms in the body and the middle age of a person's life has a predominance of *pitta dosha*<sup>5</sup>. So for the proper functioning of HPO axis in the reproductive period, a balancing in the predominance of *vata*, *kapha* and *pitta* respectively is very essential.

The age description regarding menarche explained in classics seems similar with the period of pubertal changes. Though a girl attains menarche by 12yrs, Acharyas consider 16Yrs and above as a better period for conception. It can be correlated to the modern view that a girl after menarche usually has anovulatory cycles for next 1-2yrs and also a girl who is matured physiologically and psychologically will only be able to rear up her baby in a better manner. Based on dosha predominance, usually the proliferative phase including ovulation has a *Kapha* predominance, secretory phase has *Pitta* predominance and menstrual phase has the predominance of *Vata*. During menstruation the use of light food with restricted activities is advised for the first 3 days and this may be the reason for reduced incidence of endometriosis in the earlier times as we know retrograde menstrual flow is one among the cause of endometriosis and also the concept of not taking head bath in the first 3 days seems scientific as the quality of cold water can hinder the normal flow of menstrual blood. Also the herbs *tila*, *kulatha* etc has the ability to promote *pitta* and thereby influencing the hormonal level action leading to proper folliculogenesis. The difference in duration can be substantiated based on the amount of bleeding. It can be taken as severe bleeding with 3 days or moderate bleeding with 5 days and less bleeding with 7 days, all of these come under normalcy only. Specific treatments for menstrual disorders with respect to doshas are elaborately mentioned in all the classics. It helps to determine effective treatment for specific menstrual disorders.

Marriage from a different family had been emphasized to prevent the occurrence of inherited diseases. The women with chronic diseases and other structural abnormalities were discarded and this is to prevent the occurrence of congenital abnormalities. It reminds us about the modern views on consanguineous marriage and inherited diseases. Purificatory therapies and *basti karma* are advised to improve the quality of *bija*, to stimulate the responsiveness of reproductive system and also to provide better health to mother before conception.

The advice to do *maithuna* by a women in *uthana* position(dorsal) helps for the deposition of semen in the vaginal pool and also aids for the easy swimming up of sperm. Preconceptional drugs used for intake and instillation have proven effect on the endometrial receptivity and there by leading to proper implantation.

The menstrual irregularities explained by modern science can be well correlated to various *arthava dushti*'s. Based on dosha predominance there is separate description of each *dushti*. Following the *pathya* and *apathya* descriptions told during the *rajaswala charya* can be considered as the ultimate remedy to prevent any sort of menstrual abnormalities.

*Panchamahabhutas* form the substratum for the formation of *dosha*, *dhatu* and *malas*.The food consumed by the mother serves as the source of *panchamahabhutas* for fetal development. During pregnancy, the diet and regimen prescribed for women develops in her body a *kapha* predominant stage i.e. essential for the development of the baby in utero. *The* medicinal preparations told in the month wise *garbhini paricharya* also is in accordance with the maternal and fetal changes of corresponding month. The advice to give *laja manda* in pregnancy is one of the efficient means to supply quick nourishment to the dehydrated women. *Gokshuradi ksheerapaka* advised in 6<sup>th</sup> month helps to prevent pregnancy induced hypertension and the *basti* performed in the last trimester not only relieve constipation but also help to do the *anulomana* of *vata*(normal downward movement of *vata*) which is very essential for the ease of normal delivery.

*Sukradhikatha* can be interpreted as the influence of SRY gene on Y-chromosome and its absence can be taken as *arthava adhikatha*. The concept of doing *pumsavana* has different interpretations. It is mainly done with the intention of begetting a healthy child and to prevent defects related to implantation. The concept of Bahupathya (multiple pregnancy) is considered to happen due to the over action of *Vayu* in the *bija* (zygote).So it mostly give the description of monozygotic twins.

The *masanumasika garbha vridhi* features are very similar to the corresponding USG findings. The advice to avoid *garbhopagathakara bhavas* and to take advice of experienced female are told to prevent all sort of teratogenicities and accidental miscarriages that can happen during gestation.

In ayurveda, stability or calmness of mind is also considered as an important prerequisite for conception. The advice to do prayer's therefore help in balancing the psychological state of couples before sexual intercourse. The epigenetic concept can also be considered here. The psychological status of mother during gestation has a crucial role in fetal development.

The *mooda garbha* corresponds to different abnormal lie and presentations of the fetus. The management of *udara patana* in *mooda garbha* can be considered as laprotomy or caesarian sections of present day practice. The *poorva karmas* told for *mooda garbha* management seems similar to the preoperative work up's.

*Sahaja vyadhi*'s are described as those disease inherited from the parents like *arsha* and *kushta*. In such diseases the *bija* formed by union of *shukra* and *arthava* has an afflicted *gudavali* in *arsha* and *twak* in case of *kushta* in their *bija bhaga* responsible for the formation of *guda* and *twak*. *Garbhaja vyadhis* happen when the *bija* i.e. already formed gets afflicted

due to mother's food, activities, environmental factors etc. These concepts seem similar to the explanations regarding hereditary and congenital diseases.

The advice of shifting to *soothika graham* provides a suitable hygienic place to conduct the delivery and as it is well equipped with medicines and instruments it is an ideal place to handle emergency situations of *mooda garbha* and undescended placenta.

The concept of *soothika kala* goes in hand with the puerperial period of modern science. Ayurveda consider the body of a puerperal as *shoonya sharira* i.e. a body with depleted *dhathus*. So to regain the strength physically and mentally, she is advised to follow some restrictions in her diet and other regimens. This helps to normalize her digestive power, to stabilize her body and mind and also the practice of abdominal binding helps in faster involution and to strengthen her abdominal muscles. The herbal preparations told for *soothika* includes *sthanya shodaka* (breast milk purifying) and *sthanya janana* drugs (galactagogue), so it helps to nourish the child along with prevention of new born diseases.

The explanation of menopause related symptoms suits well with ayurvedic concept of *swabhavika jara janya lakshanas* (related to ageing) and *vridha suratothsava vargitha*. So the herbal preparations advised during the climacteric phase aims to bring a balance in *vata* and *pitta*. This helps to provide a symptomatic relief from the disturbances of menopausal period.

## CONCLUSION

Ayurveda is a science with its root from pre Vedic period. There is wide scope for research in this field of science. Scientific explanations to interpret each and every part of this science is difficult. But a retrospective approach on the various practices proves the validity of this science. By following these ayurvedic practices in different epochs of life, a woman can manage and balance her body during the physiological changes in a better way without medical care.

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