

MENSTRUAL CYCLE: AN AYURVEDIC PROSPECTIVE**Sushma Shankar**

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ABSTRACT

The menstrual cycle in ayurveda is called *rituchakra*. It consists of three phases- the *rajahsravakaal*, the *ritukaala* and the *rtuvyatitkaala*. Also it shows a periodicity of one *chandramasa*(28 days). Its proper onset on time denotes an intact hypothalamo-pituitary-ovarian axis and a normally functioning reproductive system. On the other hand, deviation from normal pattern denotes a diseased state which can be cured only when diagnosed properly. Abnormal menstruation is the most important and commonest cause of infertility. Also many gynaecological disorders are related to it, most of which come under *aartavadushti*, *yonivyapat*, *bandhya*etc. as mentioned in ayurveda.

Key words: *rituchakra*, *rajahsravakaal*, *aartavadushti*, *yonivyapat*, *menstruation*.

INTRODUCTION

Menstruation in gynaecology has been defined as the visible manifestation of cyclic physiologic uterine bleeding due to shedding of the endometrium, following invisible interplay of hormones mainly through hypothalamo-pituitary-ovarian axis.¹The menstrual cycle occurring in females has been termed in Ayurveda as *Rituchakra*. The word ‘*chakra*’ signifies its regular onset at regular intervals, just like a cycle. A single *rituchakra* covers a period of one *chandramasa* (28 days) and it has been divided into three phases-the *Rajahsravakaala*, the *Ritukaala* and the *Rituvyatitakaala*.²

***PrathamaRajodarshankaala* (age of menarche) and *Rajonivrittikaala* (age of menopause)**

The *rituchakra* does not occur in young girls (before menarche) because their *yoni* (reproductive system) is *heen* (under developed). As they grow elder, all the bodily systems get matured and men-

struation also starts.³ the first menstruation in life is called menarche which is one of the signs of puberty.⁴ this has been called as *prathamrajodarshankaala*. On the other hand menopause means permanent cessation of menstruation at the end of reproductive life due to loss of ovarian follicular activity.⁵ it has been termed as *rajonivrittikaala*. Acharya *Sushrta* has mentioned that the *rituchakra* starts from the age of 12years and comes to an end at the age of 50years. ⁶*Vagbhat* has also given the same opinion.⁷ *Acharya Kashyap* has given some different view. He has said that the menstrual cycle appears at the age of 16. At the same time he has also said that this age of initiation of menses (menarche) gets influenced by specific *ahara* (dietetics) and *arogya* (health).⁸ *Arundatta* has mentioned that the age of appearance of menses and the age of menopause can also occur before 12yrs and 50yrs, respectively.⁹

All these are quite similar to the modern views where the age of menarche has been considered between 10 and 16 years, the peak time being 13 years. The onset of menses denotes an intact hypothalamo-pituitary-ovarian axis, functioning ovaries, presence of responsive endometrium to the endogenous ovarian steroids and the presence of a patent uterovaginal canal. The important controlling factors for onset of puberty (and hence menarche) are genetic, nutrition, body weight, psychologic state, exposure to light and others. A girl living in urban areas with good nutrition, adequate body weight and whose mother and sisters have early menarche, start puberty early. 10

Also the age at which menopause occurs is genetically predetermined. The age of menopause ranges between 45-55 years, average being 50 years. Cigarette smoking and severe malnutrition may cause early menopause. 11

Rajahsravakaala (the menstrual phase)

The *rajahsravakaala* or the menstrual phase comes at an interval of one month. The duration of this phase varies according to different *acharyas*. In general the duration is from three to five days. 12 Explaining about the physiology of this cycle, *Acharya Sushruta* has said that the dark coloured blood gets collected during the whole month by the *artavvimochini-dhamani* in the *garbhashaya* and this collected blood gets expelled through the *yonimukha* monthly by the action of *vayu (apanavayu)*. This is the phase of *rajahsrava*. 13 The character of the blood expelled during this *kaal* has also been mentioned. These characters play a great role in diagnosing various types of '*striroga*' in which the normal features of the menstrual blood get altered. *Acharya Charak* has explained it very beautifully. According to

him, the normal menstruation is that which has an interval of one month, duration of five days, is not associated with pain or burning sensation, the expelled blood is neither very scanty nor excess in amount, and resembles the colours of *gunjaphala*, red lotus flower, or of *indragopa*. 14 *Acharya Sushruta* has further said that the *shuddhaartava* (non-vitiated menstrual blood) is that which is of the colour of rabbit's blood or of *laksharas* and which does not stain clothes. 15 If the menstrual blood is not having these features then it means that it is vitiated by the *doshas* and is *vikrit* (diseased). In ayurveda, the specific *aahar-vihar* for the women during menses (*rajaswalacharya*) has also been mentioned. Coitus specially has been contraindicated by all the *acharyas* during this phase of *rituchakra*. 16 This phase according to modern concept is the phase of menstrual flow which represents that the fertilisation did not occur during the secretory phase, so the superficial two-third of the endometrium is shed and a new cycle begins. 17

Ritukaala

Ritukaala is that phase of *rituchakra* which comes after the *Rajahsravakaala*. The duration of this phase is twelve days according to *Acharya Sushruta*. 18 *Acharya Vagbhat* considers this duration as twelve days or sixteen days or it may also be of one month. 19 *Acharya Kashyap* has given a different concept depending upon different races of the society. 20

It is called *ritukaala* because during this phase of a woman's menstrual cycle, if her *garbhashaya* receives the seeds (sperms), there are chances of conception (just like the breeding season). The reason for conception during *ritukaala* has been explained very well as follows-as the lotus

flower closes itself after sun-set, similarly the *yoni* of women gets constricted after *ritukaala* and does not accept *shukra* or the entry of *beej* (sperms) into its inner components i.e. uterus, fallopian tubes etc. 21 Various characteristic features of *ritumati* woman have also been mentioned. The *ritumati* woman looks charming, her mouth and teeth are moist , she looks excited to hear love stories and wants to have sex , her flanks, eyes and hair are lax, she feels quivering or twitching over arms, breasts, pelvis, umbilicus, thighs and hips and looks very happy and excited. Alongwith many other things, the clinically impotent *Ksharkarma* and *nasya* have also been contraindicated to *ritumati stri*.22 This *ritukaala* is the proliferative phase of the menstrual cycle which represents restoration of the endometrial epithelium from the preceding menstruation.23

Rituvyatitakaala

This is the phase of *Rituchakra* just after the *ritukaala* and it ends with the onset of the *rajahsravakaala*. This phase has been mentioned in very short as the phase of the *rituchakra* when there occurs the closure or constriction of the *yoni*.24 Because of this closure, entry of sperms is not allowed so no conception in this phase.

The *rituvyatitakaala* is the secretory phase of the menstrual cycle which represents preparation of the uterus for implantation of the fertilized ovum.25

Importance of Rituchakra

Rituchakra or menstrual cycle is one of the most important physiological events in female's life. A healthy menstrual cycle is a must for reproduction and continuation of the progeny. It is very important to know about the normal physiology of Rituchakra because only after knowing about this , prakrit and vikrita-

wasthas of women regarding menstrual cycle can be assessed. Many *strivyadhis* (gynaecological diseases) as mentioned in ayurveda can also be diagnosed and treated. Some of these diseases and their symptoms related with menstrual abnormalities are as follows:

1. Ashtaartavadushti

Vatajaartavadushti- The *Artava* (menstrual blood) becomes red, black or dark violet in colour, thin in consistency, dry, frothy and scattered (with small clots), and the patient has perforating or piercing type of pain.

Pittajaartavdushti- the *Artava* vitiated by pitta becomes yellowish or bluish in colour, is free from unctuousness, smells like pus, fungus, blood or has putrid smell, the excreted blood is hot, associated with burning sensation and there occurs feeling of heat at the time of its excretion.

Kaphajaartavdushti- The *artava* vitiated by *kapha* becomes whitish or slightly yellowish in colour, appears as if mixed with bone marrow, becomes very thick, slippery or lubricous, unctuous and settles down if put in water.

Kunapagandhiartavadushti- The *kunapagandhi*(smell of a dead body) *artavadushti* is caused by *rakta*. In this *vikriti*, the blood discharged during menses is increased in amount and red like fresh blood. It is also associated with heat and burning sensation etc. features of *pitta*.

Granthibhutaartavadushti- The *granthibhuta*(clotted appearance) *artavadushti* is caused by vitiation of *vata* with *kapha* and is associated with features of both the *doshas* (pain due to *vata* and unctuousness due to *kapha* etc.).

Putipuyanibhartavdushti- *Putipuyanibh* (putrid and purulent) *artavadushti* is caused by *pitta* with *kaphadoshas* according to Sushruta and Vagbhat1 and due

to *rakta* with *pitta* by Vagbhat 2. It is characterised with features of *pitta* and *kapha*.

Ksheenartavadushti- *Ksheen* (scanty) *artavadushti* is caused by *pitta* with *vata*. In this condition, menstruation is delayed, and menstrual blood is scanty and is associated with pain in vagina.

Mutrapurishagandhiartavadushti-

Mutrapurishagandhi (smell of urine and faeces) *artavadushti* is caused due to vitiation of all the three *doshas* and has features of all of them.²⁶

2. *Artavakshaya*- In this condition, the menstruation does not appear in appropriate time or is delayed (prolonged intermenstrual period), is scanty and there is pain in vagina.²⁷

3. *Nashtartava*- In this condition, the *doshas* obstruct the passage or orifices of *artavavaha srotas*, thus the *artava* (menses) does not appear monthly or is destroyed. The obstructing *doshas* are *vata* and *kapha*, because *pitta* increases *rakta* and thus produces excessive bleeding.²⁸

4. *Artavaativridhi*- The patient suffering with *artava-ativridhi* has generalised bodyache, excessive bleeding during menses and foul smell in menstrual blood.²⁹

5. *Asrigdara* or *Pradara*- Due to *pradeerana* (excessive excretion) of *raja* (menstrual blood), it is called *pradara* and since there is *deerana* (excessive excretion) of *asrik* (menstrual blood), it is called *asrigdara*.³⁰ This disease appears to be analogous to menorrhagia. Depending upon the involvement of *doshas*, it is of four types - *vataja*, *pittaja*, *kaphaja* and *sannipataja*.³¹

Vataja Asrigdara - The menstrual blood is frothy, thin, rough, blackish or reddish resembling washings of flowers of *palash* in colour, comes with or without pain. *Vayu*

produces severe pain in sacral, groin and cardiac region, flanks, back and pelvis.

Pittaja Asrigdara- The menstrual blood is bluish, yellowish or blackish in colour, hot, comes in profuse amount, repeatedly and with pain. It is associated with burning sensation, redness, thirst, mental confusion, fever and giddiness.

Kaphaja Asrigdara- The menstrual blood is slimy, pale, heavy, unctuous, and cold, mixed with mucus and thick and is discharged with mild pain. Other symptoms like vomiting, anorexia, nausea, dyspnoea and cough etc. are also present.

Sannipataja Asrigdara- Here the clinical features of all the three *doshas* are present.³²

6. *Vataja yonivyapat*- Along with other features, the menses appears with sound, pain, is frothy and dry (absence of mucous).³³

7. *Pittajayonivyapat*- The menstrual blood is blue, yellow, or black in colour, excess in amount, hot and smells like a dead body.³⁴

8. *Kaphaja yonivyapat*- The menstrual blood discharged is yellowish and unctuous.³⁵

9. *Tridoshaja yonivyapat*- The menstrual discharge is whitish pale and unctuous.³⁶

10. *Asrija* or *apraja* /*Raktayoni* /*Lohitakshara yonivyapat*-

Even after conception, there is excessive bleeding per vaginum. Due to this excessive bleeding, it is also known as *Raktayoni*. According to Sushruta, *lohitakshara* is the condition when there is trickling or oozing of blood per vaginum associated with burning sensation.³⁷

11. *Arajaska/Lohitakshaya*- Here, *rakta* is vitiated by *pitta* and so the woman becomes extremely emaciated and dis-

coloured, and there is no menses i.e. extremely weak condition along with amenorrhoea.

In *lohitkshaya*, due to vitiation of *vata* and *pitta*, the *raja* is decreased and the lady suffers from burning sensation, emaciation and discoloration.³⁸

12. *Udavartini yonivyapat-* Due to the movement of flatus etc. natural urges in reverse direction, the aggravated *ap-anavayu* moving in reverse direction fills *yonis* (uterus). This *yonis* seized with pain, initially throws or pushes the *raja* (menstrual blood) upwards, then discharges it with great difficulty. The lady feels immediate relief following discharge of the menstrual blood. Since here the *raja* moves upwards or in reverse direction, it is termed *udavartini*.³⁹

13. *Karnini yonivyapaat-* In a pregnant woman, due to straining during labour in absence of labour pains, the *vata* obstructed by foetus, withholding *kapha* and getting mixed with rakta produces *karnika* in *yonis*, which obstructs the passage of *raja* (menstrual blood).⁴⁰

14. *Shandi yonivyapat*—The woman suffering from *shandiyonis* does not have *artava* (menses) and breasts, though she is capable of coitus, however her vaginal canal feels very rough.⁴¹

15. *Bandhya yonivyapat-* Here the *artava* (menses) is destroyed.⁴²

DISCUSSION

Thus we see that menstruation has been very well explained in ayurveda. The complete physiology of menstruation, age of onset, age of withdrawal, duration and amount of blood discharged, colour, smell, unctuousness, etc. of the menstrual blood in a normal condition have all been explained in very detail. Today with the development of modern tools and techniques,

we are able to explain these things in terms of hormones and other physiological processes. But the concepts given by our ancient acharyas can never be ignored. There are so many diseases in women which are associated with abnormal menstruation. Most of them are curable if diagnosed properly. Problems related with menstrual disturbances are one of the most common problems amongst females. Today, everyone's life has become so fast and stressful that we don't have time to take care of ourselves properly. There is no fixed schedule for daily activities. People don't have time for proper *aahara* and *vihara*. Especially women who have to take care of household and work outside also, are facing a lot of health related problems. All these changes in lifestyle are disturbing the bodily physiological activities and resulting in serious disorders and diseases. The age of onset (menarche) and the age of cessation (menopause) of the *rituchakra*, regularity and periodicity of the *rituchakra*, the amount of the *rajahsrava* (blood discharged), the density of *rajahsrava*, the unctuousness of the *rajahsrava*, the colour of the *rajahsrava* and any foul smell if present, plus its association with pain, etc. are the points which should be considered while making the diagnosis. Some menstrual disorders like *shandi yonivyapat* are because of some genetic or chromosomal abnormalities and cannot be cured.

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