

MAINTAINING WOMEN HEALTH THROUGH AYURVEDA – A REVIEW STUDY

Jasmine Gujarathi¹, Ritesh Gujarathi²

¹Professor and Head, Dept of Prasuti Tantra and Stri Roga;

²Associate professor, Dept of Samhita Siddhanta;

G J Patel Institute of Ayurvedic Studies and Research, New Vallabh Vidyanagar, Anand, Gujarat, India

Email: jassyleo@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Increase in the lifespan of women has increased prevalence of various disorders in women throughout lifespan. The vulnerabilities during each different phase of her life and need for a safe and effective way to maintain health is required for 21st century female. To perform her duties whilst maintaining her health is her prime concern. Ayurveda describes the safe, effective, and economical methods in the form of *Paricharyas* in the texts. It is needed to propagate the ancient science through current evidences for increasing the belief in Ayurveda. Current review study describes concise description of all *Paricharyas* with analysis. The role of Ayurveda in maintaining health and menopause, preventing cancers, CVD and reproductive health is also elaborated here.

Keywords: *Paricharya, Rajaswala, Garbhini, Sutika*

INTRODUCTION

Woman's life is associated with drastic physiological, anatomical and psychological changes during menarche, reproductive period, pregnancy, menopause and post menopause. Because of these drastic changes, she is in a vulnerable state and constantly subjected to risks for developing many pathologies. Quality of woman's life is dependent on many factors such as the culture and position in the society, environment, life-style and changing demands of the society towards her. Over the centuries, woman's role in the society has changed from being only a source of reproduction and house wives to a multi tasking female who has to earn for the family maintaining the previous roles. These changes in the demand of the society have led to tremendous health care problems and according to

recent data about 92% women of all age suffer from one or other gynaecological disorder. *Ayurveda* recognizes the changes in women's body throughout life and avails simple techniques to maintain healthy life throughout.

Materials and Methods:

1. Literature review of Ayurveda texts for women health issues and management
2. Analyzing all management according to different stages of women's life

Ayurveda and Women Health

Ayurveda the oldest system of medicine and the science of life helps in the journey towards betterment of

women health. Ayurveda not only defines all epoch's of woman's life like *Bala*, *Kumari*, *Rajaswala*, *Ritumati*, *Garbhini*, *Prasava*, *Sutika* etc, but also the health status in regards of *Dosha* and *Dhatu* variation and preventive steps in the form of diet and life style modifications to achieve health during all these epoch's where drastic changes occurs which makes her susceptible for major illnesses. These diet and life-style modifications are known as *Paricharya*.

Rajaswala Paricharya - Recognizing the changes in female's body during menstruation (*Rajaswala*), Ayurveda peers have described certain do's and don'ts in the form of **Rajaswala paricharya** to maintain her balance of *Doshas* and help in proper menstrual function. These modifications are in the form of eating light meal, observing celibacy, to eat directly or through leaf or clay vessel, avoiding pungent and spicy foods, not to sleep during daytime, not to perform strenuous activities, avoiding use of scents in the form of anointments.^{1,2} Apart from these, many cultural and traditional restrictions are prevalent in many societies in the form of menstrual taboos in which isolation, not to perform domestic work, religious activities, and sexual activities are major.

The observance and non observance of menstrual restrictions and taboos are under debate since a decade. The issue of gender inequality and women empowerment is raised while discussing about the restrictions to be followed by female during menstruation. The 21st century woman considers these restrictions as burden and a path of obstruction towards her empowerment but the science behind following certain rules are not emphasized. One should understand the science behind this and not blindly follow all the campaigns. The role of *Apana vayu*, menotoxins and volatile compound like pheromones should never be overlooked.³ Menotoxin – a substance with certain pharmacological and chemical reactions is believed to be secreted in sweat, saliva, menstrual blood, milk and other secretions in menstruating women. The research shows that chemically these menotoxins exhibited properties near to oxycholestrin which causes prolongation of blood coagulation. The properties of this

substance menotoxin were considered identical to Necrosin in another work. Necrosin is a toxic substance (inflammatory exudates) that induces leucopenia.^{4,5} Pheromones, volatile compounds released in sweat, known for sexual attraction are supposed to influence menstrual cycle of other female in contact. The interval of menstrual cycle of recipient female is shortened.^{6,7,8} This is known as menstrual synchronization which is common in hostel inmates and female members of same family.⁹

Many explanations have been offered for the apparent effects of exercise on menstrual cycles, including loss of body fat (resulting in estrogen deficit), overall weight loss, dietary factors (especially low percentage of calories from protein and less dietary cholesterol which is building block of estrogen) emotional stress and exercise triggered release of endorphin (natural sedative akin to morphine).³

Non observance of certain rules and restrictions leads to sickness related to reproductive health of female. The tremendous increase in the infertility and PCOD are the results of diet and lifestyle changes which are harmful for reproductive function.

Ritumati Paricharya are the rituals which prepares a female physically and mentally for conception. Ayurveda emphasizes on attaining a healthy progeny and for this all the procedures beginning from the selection of partner to the act of achieving conception is described in detail. The best period for conception is termed as *Ritukala* which is after the stoppage of menstruation till next 12 days.¹⁰ The female during this period is termed as *Ritumati*. After stoppage of menstruation, taking a head bath, offering prayers and preparing herself by using scents of flowers and good clothes¹¹ acts as aphrodisiac and favors conception. The cervical glands which secrete alkaline mucus with pH of 7.8 is nutritive for spermatozoa. The characteristics of cervical secretions change throughout menstrual cycle. Under the influence of estrogen in proliferative phase of menstrual cycle (1 to 13th day) the cervical mucus is rich in water and electrolyte, which renders it thin and clear favoring sperm penetration. Whereas after ovulation, under the influence of pro-

gesterone, the cervical mucus with increased protein content renders it thick, scanty and preventing further sperm penetration. Hence before ovulation is the perfect time for conception mentioned rightly as *Ritukala* under *Ayurveda*.

Garbhini Paricharya are the lifestyle and diet modifications to be observed by female after conception. Throughout the gestational period, the woman's body suffers from major changes which affect her health and along with this she has to provide sufficient nourishment for the fetus. It is said in Ayurveda that well-being of fetus depends on the mother. The diet, lifestyle and psyche of mother throughout pregnancy affect the physical and spiritual development of fetus.¹² The development of gross motor function and cognitive functions of fetus varies according to the emotions of the mother. *Ayurveda* gives detailed description of Antenatal care in the form of *Samanya Paricharya* – General antenatal care and *Vishesha* – *Masanumasik* – Month wise antenatal care. In general care, *Ayurveda* clearly defines the kind of psychological status the female during pregnancy should be in. Negative emotions like anger, fear, jealousy, shock etc should be avoided. To remain happy and pious, have good conduct, pray and worship diety and Bramhana. Thinking of well being of others are positive emotions and for this good reading and remaining in contact with *satvika* people is important.¹³ Sleeping on soft mattress, remaining clean, wearing clean and light colored clothes with ornaments are also mentioned as regimen to be followed throughout the pregnancy. In month wise antenatal care milk and milk products like butter ghee - diet rich in carbohydrates, easily digestible should be dominant throughout the pregnancy. During last two months, preparation of delivery is aimed by administering certain medicated enemas and vaginal tampons to soften the birth canal and help in normal delivery. Hence *Garbhini Paricharya* aims in achieving a proper growth and development of offspring with maintaining health of mother and preparing for a normal delivery.¹⁴

Sutika Paricharya is the regimen after delivery. Again, this is a stage of drastic changes in her body. This *Paricharya* intend to replenish all the *Dhatus*, to

overcome the loss of nourishment, to prevent mother from sepsis or other diseases and to promote proper lactation. Proper massage with oils, hot water bath, wrapping cloth on abdomen and waist area, this all helps in relieving pain and preventing *Vata Prakopa*.¹⁵ The diet should be gradually introduced while balancing her status of *Agni* i.e. metabolism. The formulations given are again rich in carbohydrates and making them digestible with adding certain herbs like *sunthi*, *pippali*¹⁶ etc. Using decoctions of *Vata hara* herbs like *Dashmoola* and milk prepared with *Vidarigandhadhi* group which are galactagogue helps in relieving pain and promoting lactation. The regimen for *Sutika* is followed in all tradition and cultures till date.

Menopause and Ayurveda

Old age is vulnerable time for woman as along with ageing she has to suffer from inevitable scars of menopause. Menopause is permanent cessation of menstruation leading to a estrogen deficient stage of 1/3rd of her life. With increasing life expectancy, the female has to spend more time in the post menopausal period.¹⁷ Old age affects men and women differently. Estrogen is responsible for maintaining bone mass and cardiovascular functions throughout reproductive period. The deficiency of estrogen leads to osteoporosis and Cardiovascular diseases in the form of silent heart attacks.¹⁸ The menopausal symptoms like mood swings and hot flushes decline the quality of her life during transition period. The group of plant derived natural estrogen known as phytoestrogens have gained attention of all medical sciences since last 3 decades. Many herbs such as *Shatavari*, *Vidari*, *Yashtimadhu* etc are rich in phytoestrogen and research studies indicate their role in relieving menopausal symptoms and preventing osteoporosis and maintaining lipid profile, hence preventing cardiovascular diseases. Extensive use of *Shatavari*, which is a well-known female rejuvenative (*Rasayana*) should be done in menopausal and postmenopausal period.¹⁹

Cancer and Ayurveda

Two of the most common cancers affecting women are breast and cervical cancers. The latest global fig-

ures show that around half a million women die from cervical cancer and half a million from breast cancer each year.²⁰ Many of these cancers are caused by hormone replacement therapy for menopause, osteoporosis, and CVD. Phytoestrogen which are helping in relieving menopausal symptoms acts as selective estrogen receptor modulators. These means that the estrogen in phytoestrogens are useful for bone, brain and blood and not in breast and endometrium.²¹ Hence, it reduces the risk of developing breast and endometrial carcinoma. Apart from these, research on anti carcinogenic herbs has been gaining popularity as an adjuvant in treating various cancers.

Ayurveda and Reproductive health

With demonous rise in gynaecological disorders like infertility, menstrual irregularities, urinary tract infections, cervical erosions etc, the demand for alternative therapy have tremendously increased during the last decade. Ayurveda describes all gynaecological disorders under *Yonivyapada*. Non congenial diet, faulty lifestyle, hereditary, previous life deeds, use of sexual substances are considered to be the important factors affecting reproductive health. It is a well known fact now that the diet, life style modifications with scientific approach in treatment considering *Dosha*, *Dhatu* and *Agni* has given encouraging results in treating disorders related to reproductive health. It will not be an exaggeration to say that many patients with failure by test tube baby (IVF) have gained fertility by Ayurveda treatment. Hysterectomy can be saved in patients with fibroids, adenomyosis and cervical erosion by treatment through Ayurveda. Simple herbal medicines with diet and life style modifications can help in treating these benign conditions.

DISCUSSION

From the review of the *Ayurveda* literature, it seems that *Ayurveda* has described in detail the do's and don'ts to maintain the health of women throughout the lifespan. Just following simple life style modifications, a female respond through the different epochs of life uneventfully and healthily. *Paricharyas* are specifically designed looking into the status of *Dhatu*

and *Doshas* during different phases. Observance of such disciplined lifestyle helps woman in the journey towards betterment of health. *Rajaswala*, *Ritumati*, *Garbhini* and *Sutika Avastha* denotes major hormonal changes in woman's body. Even 28 days of a woman's menstrual cycle are not same in terms of hormones. Neglecting the restrictions and lifestyle derange the hormonal functions and hence leads to pathologies of reproductive system. *Garbhini Avastha* is an important phase of her life where she needs to sustain her own health with proper growth and development of fetus. The *Samskaras* – *Garbhadhana* and *Garbha Samskara* ensures a healthy progeny and the *Garbhini Paricharya* helps in proper growth and development of fetus whilst maintaining her health and preparing for normal labour. *Sutika* stage is another phase of woman's life where *Vata dosha* aggravates at maximum along with severe *Dhatu kshaya*. *Sutika Paricharya* brings her to normalcy and promotes lactation. Though Menopause is not considered as a disease in Ayurveda yet the description of *Rajonivritti* again denotes *dhatu kshaya* and *Vata vriddhi*. The female rejuvenative herbs makes her vulnerable 1/3 rd of life healthy preventing conditions like osteoporosis, CVD and Alzheimer's. preventive measures for maintaining health should begin right from menarche and after menopause. The Selective estrogen receptor modulators present in phytoestrogens like *Shatavari* prevents from carcinoma of breast and endometrium. Elaborate descriptions of *Yonivyapada* with their management maintain the reproductive health of female and also manage postmenopausal conditions like genital prolapse.

CONCLUSION

Ayurveda, in the journey towards better health for women, offers many guidelines related to healthy food and lifestyle to be adopted during different important stages of her life. By following these simple guidelines, women can avoid illness and maintain her health status. Apart from these guidelines, awareness and education of all women, beginning from adolescent period is very important. Removing the myths and stating the facts, helping in improvement of her over-

all physical and psychological health will be a great benefit for her in the future. It is the need of present era to understand and adapt Ayurveda in day to day life for avoiding consequences of faulty diets and lifestyle. All women should follow the regimen and directions described in Ayurveda for her wellness throughout the life. This will ensure a future with health to all girls and women irrespective of their social status.

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