



The Ayurvedic Approach to Fertility

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Factors Necessary for Fertility

According to Ayurveda, as a plant grows from the combination of seed, season, soil & water, so human conception takes place if these 4 factors are combined properly.

1. The timing - *rtu* - Specific times/season depending on parents' constitutions, the time in their lives. Good proliferative phase & ovulation. 2. The field - *kshetra* - healthy uterus & female reproductive tract, within the wider framework of a balanced constitution, free of toxins & obstructions to facilitate entry of sperm & fertilisation.

3. Fluids & nutrition - *ambu* - formed from digested food for proper formation of hormones development of foetus 4. The seed - *bija*- healthy ovum & sperm, the most refined tissue from the best food, thoughts, lifestyle & environment, free of toxins etc

If there is any impairment in the above 4 factors, it can hamper conception & cause *vandhyatva*/infertility.

Factors to be considered:

3 doshas

7 dhatus

Ojas

Agni

Ama

Treatment of agni & ama

Panchakarma

Vajikarana & Rasayana

According to Ayurveda, everything in the universe is composed of 5 factors or elements:

ether/space (*akasa*),

air/motion (*vayu*),

fire/radiant energy (*teja*),

water/cohesive factor (*jala*)

earth/mass (*prithvi*).

They represent 5 states or qualities of energy we experience daily in mind & body. Not to be interpreted literally but as metaphors helping us to understand the universe.

The 3 Doshas

The 5 elements combine to form 3 basic life forces, the *doshas*, *vata*, *pitta* and *kapha*, which exist in everything & influence all mental & physiological processes. Each *dosha* is a combination of 2 of the 5 elements.

We are born with our individual balance of *doshas*, largely determined by the balance of *doshas* in our parents at the time of conception. This is known as our *prakruti*, which remains unaltered throughout our lives. Our body type, temperament & susceptibility to illness are largely governed by the predominant *dosha* in our constitution. Should our *doshas* become imbalanced through our diet, lifestyle, stress, shock or other factors and we move away from our inherited constitution, our condition is then known as *vikruti*. The aim of Ayurvedic treatment is to bring our *vikruti* back to our *prakruti*.

The Ayurvedic View of the Menstrual Cycle

The cycle is divided into 3 phases according to the *doshas*. Normal menses 26-30 day cycle, 5 days, moderate flow & colour, no clots, discomfort or PMS.

Vata

Composed of ether & air, *vata* governs all movement in mind & body. It regulates the nervous system which influences the hypothalamus, pituitary & female hormones & the muscles in the pelvic area. The energising force for the entire body & the motivating force behind the other 2 *doshas*, which are incapable of movement or change without it.

All menstrual difficulties are related in some way to imbalance of *vata* which can then disturb the other 2 *doshas*.

Vata phase

Apana vata regulates all downward movement in the body & moves the egg from the ruptured follicle at ovulation, pushes menstrum down & out during menstruation & facilitates childbirth.

Signs of Excess Vata

Scanty flow, frothy/dark/dry/old blood Short periods Dysmenorrhoea, cramping pain radiating into groin, thighs Lower back ache, stiffness, weakness, feeling cold Wind, bloating, constipation Irregular/long cycles, amenorrhoea PMS, mood swings, depression, fatigue, anxiety, insomnia Endometriosis with intense pain Polycystic ovaries Vaginal dryness

Pitta

Composed of fire & water, the principle of transformation, governs chemical & metabolic conversions that create energy & heat, enzymes & hormones. It moves through the blood to the menstrual channel. Toxins absorbed from the gut are carried into the menstrual channel & predispose to menstrual & gynaecological problems. Menstruation helps to clear excess pitta from the system.

Pitta phase

From ovulation until bleeding is the progesterone phase when begins *pitta* is accumulating. The system heats up & this can lead to PMS including feelings of irritation & emotional overload.

Signs of Excess Pitta:

Heavy periods/flooding, dark red /bright red blood, clotting, long periods 5-7 days, mid-cycle spotting, short cycles, hot discharge, odour, heat, flushing, sweating, nausea, diarrhoea, burning urination, fevers/flu symptoms skin rashes, acne, migraines/temporal headaches, photosensitivity, PMS, irritability, anger, intolerance, depression, sweet cravings, loose bowels/night sweats in premenstrual phase PID, PCOS, endometriosis with heat & menorrhagia, fibroids, infections e.g. thrush, HPV, herpes. Symptoms relieved once bleeding starts.

Kapha

Composed of water & earth, governs water & reproductive fluid & the physical structure of the body including the reproductive system. Responsible for nourishment providing building blocks for sperm & egg.

Kapha phase

From the end of bleeding until ovulation is the oestrogen phase, a time of building the endometrium, restoring strength & preparing for conception.

Signs of Excess Kapha:

Moderate flow, pale red blood Large clots, slimy/mucousy menses, sensations of cold Mild to dull pain, heaviness, weight gain, water retention, swollen breasts, back ache, nausea, catarrhal congestion, pallor, feeling unmotivated or sentimental.

To enhance fertility both parents need to resolve imbalances of the *doshas* a few months before conceiving. Full health & well being is promoted when the *doshas* work harmoniously together. Menstrual cycles should run smoothly. Any irregularities such as pain, mood swings, excessive or minimal flow, bloating, bleeding at irregular times of the cycle, need to be resolved.

The 7 Dhatus

Ayurveda classifies the body's structure into 7 tissue layers - *dhatu*s. *Dhatu* means "that which holds or supports". The *dhatu*s are generally listed from the least to most complex in structure. Each one is made out of the one that precedes it.

Rasa / plasma - composed primarily of water

Rakta / blood, specifically haemoglobin - composed of fire and water

Mamsa / muscle, skeletal and visceral - composed primarily of earth and secondarily of water and fire

Medas / fat or adipose tissue - composed mainly of water

Asthi / bone - composed of earth and air

Majja /bone marrow and nerve tissue - composed of water and earth Shukra and artava / reproductive tissues, male and female – composed of all 5 elements

Our tissues are formed from digested nutrients known as *ahara rasa*. *Ahara* means food & *rasa* means essence or juice. *Ahara rasa* provides the basis for the nourishment for all 7 tissues. To produce healthy tissues & keep ourselves functioning optimally, it is vital that the food we eat is

top quality.

Rasa is the first *dhatu* - the basic plasma from which all other tissues are made. Menstrual fluid & breast milk are *upa-dhatu*s (sub-tissues) of *rasa dhatu*. Anything that affects *rasa dhatu* will affect menses & lactation. *Vata* can dry *rasa* & affect nourishment of the tissues including the reproductive tissue, quality of menstrual flow & fertility.

Rasa produces the next tissue *rakta*/blood, which then transforms into *mamsa*/muscle, then muscle is converted into *medas*/fat, then fat into *asthi*/bone, bone into *majja*/nerve tissue & finally *majja* into *shukra*/reproductive tissue.

Shukra dhatu - the essential form of water with the power to create new life. It includes ovum, sperm & reproductive fluids. *Shukra* is male & *artava* female reproductive tissue. As the last it relies on the preceding *dhatu*s to be well nourished. When healthy, *shukra dhatu* provides strength, sexual energy, fertility & a loving & compassionate nature. It gives light to the eyes & inspiration to the soul.

Ojas The life-sustaining essence derived from nourishment of all tissues is called *ojas* - “the 8th tissue.” It is central to fertility. The prime energy reserve for the body, *ojas* provides energy, vitality, resilience, immunity & ‘joie de vivre”. Our immunity, strength, resilience & fertility depend on the quality & quantity of *ojas*. Generally those with *kapha* constitutions have good *ojas*. Excess *vata* dries out *ojas* & high *pitta* burns it up.

Each stage of *dhatu* formation takes 5 days. Since it takes 35 days to produce mature *shukra dhatu*, Ayurveda suggests sex only once a month so as not to deplete *shukra* & *ojas*. Eggs & sperm are the result of the deepest level of nutritional transformation. All we eat & drink gets continually refined until transformed into the most vital essence, the potential of life - *shukra*

The Digestive Fire: Agni

Agni is central to health & fertility. Good digestion enables food eaten to be transformed into nutrition that can be metabolised to nourish all 7 tissues & keep us in optimum health.

Each *dhatu* has its own *agni* (*dhatu-agni*) responsible for ensuring appropriate nutrients are metabolised from digested food (*ahara rasa*) for each subsequent *dhatu* and this needs to function optimally. Each tissue is produced by digestion & metabolism out of the one before it & becomes the food for the next one.

Agni is compromised by eating badly, over-eating, eating irregularly, when stressed, etc. resulting in low digestive fire. It is also affected by the balance of the *doshas*. Low *agni*/poor digestion predisposes to nutritional deficiencies from incomplete food processing. This can adversely impact many systems, including the immune, reproductive systems & liver. Partially digested/undigested food particles ferment & produce toxins/*ama*, increasing “unfriendly” gut micro-organisms, contributing to dysbiosis/sibo & leaky gut syndrome & compromising hormone balance & quality of sperm & egg.

Optimising Fertility

Ideally both partners should be healthy, with balanced *doshas*, good *agni*/digestion, no toxic accumulations, well nourished *dhatu*s, good quality sperm & ova & good production of *ojas*.

They should know their *prakruti* & *vikruti* & adopt right diet & lifestyle to maintain health, prevent hormonal disturbances & promote normal reproductive function. Both parents need to resolve imbalances of the *doshas* 3-6 months before planning to conceive.

An Ayurvedic practitioner can determine the *prakruti* & *vikruti* of a couple wanting to conceive & advise on the best diet for both, optimal time of year to conceive & other appropriate lifestyle recommendations.

Treatment

Clearing Toxins: Ama Pachana

It is advisable to undergo detoxification for a period of 3 months followed by rejuvenation to re-establish healthy *shukra dhatu*. Obstructions in the tissue channels (*srotas*) can affect tissue nutrition & metabolism & *shukra* can become deficient. Obstructions may be caused by low *agni*, toxic accumulations (*ama*) or problems as constipation, fibroids, ovarian cysts, etc.

Cleansing diets such as a kitchari fast are recommended for 2-3 weeks before using nourishing foods and herbs/*rasayanas*. Bitter & pungent herbs help to clear *ama* from the GI tract. Spices are recommended for increasing *agni* & clearing *ama*. They have the same qualities as *agni*, being hot, dry, light & fragrant.

Popular remedies for raising digestive fire include:

Ginger, cinnamon, turmeric, long pepper, black pepper cardamom, asafoetida, cumin, fennel.

Panchakarma

In-house, deep cleansing therapy can also be used to eliminate chronic, deep seated *ama*. Both men & women can be given *snehana* - ghee medicated with tonics & indicated medicines, followed by *swedana* (sweating) then cleansing herbs including purgatives/enemas.

Ayurveda treats infertility & other hormonal imbalances with *shirodhara*. Medicated oils/milk products are poured on the forehead with rhythmic movement to bring the mind into a meditative state. The focal point is what Ayurveda refers to as the third eye, considered to relate to the hypothalamus, pituitary & pineal glands deep inside the brain.

Uttar basti is an important panchakarma procedure for genito-urinary disorders of both sexes. It involves administration of a specific medicinal oil, *ghrita* or decoction into the urinary bladder or uterus. Tubal impatency, blocked tubes, adhesions to some level can be managed by *uttar basti*.

Rasayana Therapy

Rasayana - another of the 8 branches. *Rasa* means juice, essence, emotion, and *ayana* - path. *Rasa* nourishes & promotes *ojas* - our energy, vitality, immunity, fertility & joie de vivre. *Rasayanas* act by modulating the neuro-endocrino- immune system & promote health & longevity.

Rasayana herbs & foods replenish *ojas* & promote fertility are recommended for 3 months. They tend to be sweet, heavy & nourishing. They can be hard to digest, so the state of *agni* needs to be considered first. It is important to clear *ama* before using tonic herbs & foods otherwise they can

increase toxins & aggravate symptoms.

Rasayana Foods

Dairy produce is considered good to strengthen *ojas*. Ghee is recommended for restoring vitality, nourishing the nerves & increasing *ojas*. Considered good for those who want lots of sex!

Meat, poultry, fish, eggs & good fats/oils considered *rasayana* foods. Best eaten as soups or prepared with digestive herbs & spices.

Sweet preparations with rice, wheat flour, milk, ghee, honey or sugar with cardamom, pepper & ginger are popular.

Nuts & seeds strengthen the nerves & *shukra dhatu*, improve vitality & enhance *ojas*. Nut butters are good, eg almond, cashew; also walnuts, pine nuts, coconut, black sesame seeds.

Sweet fruits & legs enhance *ojas*, eg dates, raisins, figs, pomegranate, grapes, okra, sweet potatoes, yams, Jerusalem artichokes, onions cooked in ghee.

Spices - garlic, ginger, cinnamon, black pepper, cardamom, cloves, fennel, cumin, coriander, asafoetida & long pepper enhance *agni*. Can improve *ojas* especially when combined with oils e.g. ghee.

Oils eg sesame, almond, olive, coconut, avocado are nourishing. Taken internally tend to depress *agni*, so can be used externally.

Medicated oils are an essential part of rejuvenation. Made with sesame oil & tonic herbs such as ashwagandha (*Withania somnifera*), shatavari (*Asparagus racemosus*) and bala (*Sida cordifolia*), eg. ashwagandha taila, mahanaryan taila. External application of oils nourishes the body through the skin & the effects of their nutrients extend to the tissues, bypassing the digestive tract.

Vajikarana: The science of aphrodisiacs is one of the 8 branches of Ayurveda. Aphrodisiacs give direct nourishment to *shukra dhatu* & enhance fertility & sexual function. They act on the hypothalamus & limbic system & have anti- stress, adaptogenic actions, helping to alleviate anxiety associated with sex, performance & fertility. The best aphrodisiac is love.

Rasayana & Vajikarana Herbs

There are a number of Ayurvedic herbs that give direct nourishment to *shukra dhatu*.

Ashwagandha - *Withania somnifera*

Shatavari - *Asparagus racemosus*

Vidari khanda - *Ipomoea digitata*

Bala - *Sida cordifolia*

Gokshura - *Tribulus terrestris*

Guduchi - *Tinospora cordifolia*

Kapikacchu - *Mucuna pruriens*

Amalaki - *Emblica officinalis*

Pippali - *Piper long*

Bringaraj - *Eclipta alba*

5-10 grams daily in ghee or warm milk/water & with raw, natural sugar/ honey.

Fertility, the Heart & Mind

Women under constant stress produce more prolactin, cortisol & other hormones which can

interfere with regular ovulation. Ayurveda has many therapies and spiritual practices to calm the heart & mind. Yoga for fertility improves both male & female fertility capacity by minimising stress, which in turn balances the hormones of the body as well as mental health.

The body mind connection is important for conception. In a study 55% success rate for women using relaxation techniques to help them pregnant, compared to a 20% success rate for women who used only medicine & fertility techniques. (Alice D. Domer & Henry Dreher, " Healing Mind, Healthy Woman: using the mind body connection to manage stress & take control of your life", Dell Publishing, New York , AUG 1997; 53 -57).

Yoga & meditation can improve both male & female fertility by minimising stress, which helps balance hormones as well as mental health. (Preconception stress increases risk of infertility: results from a couple- based cohort study – The Life Study Human Reproduction, May 2014 29(5): 1067-75. PubMed Central PMCID: 3984126 doi:10.1093/humrep/doi 032. Epub March 2014 . Lynch C D, Sundaram R, Maisog J M, Sweeney A M, Buck Louis G).

Benefits of meditation are far reaching – reducing anxiety, boosting hormone balance, increasing libido, improving sleep, mental clarity, concentration - *ojas!* (Mindfulness-Based Program for Infertility (Galhardo A., Cunha M., Gouveia J., 27.06.2013 published in the journal 'Fertility and Sterility.' ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed)

