

An Ayurvedic View of a Woman's Menstrual Cycle.

A major indicator of a woman's health within Ayurveda is her menstrual cycle. An Ayurvedic consultation with a woman will always contain a detailed view of her menstrual cycle with her menses analysed as well as any mood and physical body changes. This may seem unnecessary from a western medical viewpoint but as the scriptures say, 'a woman's menstrual cycle is her rekta moksha', one of the Pancha Karma (purification treatments) involving blood letting. So a woman would never have to undergo rekta moksha, the blood letting purification treatment if her menstrual cycle is normal.

This leads us then to first define what a normal menstrual cycle is. With our hectic lifestyles of today, it is very easy to lose sight as to what is a normal, healthy menstrual cycle and what has been imposed on the body and mind as 'OK' but is in fact not in tune with nature. This is true for all ailments in the body. It is very easy with our busy lives to ignore certain aches as normal and not to look further into the problem. Does it really matter if there are stomach cramps and pain before a period as long as the feeling subsides- well until next month anyway!

In this article we will look at what the symptoms of pain, pre-menstrual syndrome (PMS), bloating etc mean from an Ayurveda viewpoint and how to alleviate certain problems with changes to the diet and lifestyle.

A normal menstrual cycle according to Vagbhata, quoted in Ashtanga Hrdayam, is a discharge of blood every twenty-eight days. The flow of blood is for three days and commences from the age of twelve until the age of fifty. Of course this is a classical view from the scriptures and there will be variations of this menstrual cycle, especially due to dosha imbalances. Vagbhata goes on to say that with the menstrual cycle being unvitiated and the mind and semen being pure, a healthy offspring will be born. So it is clearly seen that a healthy menstrual cycle is the prerequisite to a healthy pregnancy.

Within an Ayurveda framework the menstrual cycle is seen as a purification process, with the impurities from the body expelled in the form of blood. In Ayurveda, as well as other ancient traditions, during the menstrual period the woman rested and was on her own. This was so that she could be at peace with herself and also to let the impurities flow out properly. If thought about logically during the menstrual period the body is under a lot of strain. The body is becoming weak with the loss of blood and there may also be body pain; so it does make sense to rest a little more during this period. Because

of the way society is progressing today with the loss of male and female identities, women are increasingly working as men and forgetting that their body does need more rest during this special time. In Ayurveda and Yoga this time is thought about carefully. During menstruation the body should try and rest as much as possible and even yoga should not be practised. I know that most women would find this inconceivable and most yoga courses do not differentiate for menstruation apart from a few asanas (postures) which should not be practised. However in traditional practises of yoga, asanas are not done at all whilst a woman is on her menses. The same would be for any form of physical exercise. The body would experience a lot of force and this is not good during menstruation. Nothing should be undertaken which affects the flow of the cycle. Similarly it is not just physical actions but also mental actions which affect the flow of blood. Vagbhata states that the woman who is menstruating should only harbour good thoughts. Arguments leading to an increase in the pitta dosha can cause an increase in the flow of blood. It is a very emotional time too and there should not be too much sadness as this emotion could be exaggerated. In ancient times it was noted that bathing should also not be done; this is because cold water can decrease the or even stop the flow of blood. In a similar way, overly hot water can increase the flow. Nowadays we do not need to worry as lukewarm showers and baths can be taken. Food which is in taken should also be simple. Spicy food can increase the flow of blood, and sweet can decrease it.

Physical abstinence from all activities would be virtually impossible for most women, but it should be possible to ease the social calendar at this time and to make room for oneself. These three to four days can be seen as a time for reflection, meditation and self-awareness. There is no need for prolonged meditation as this will also affect the mind and therefore the flow of blood; but gentle quiet inward looking meditation will be ideal.

The menstrual cycle can be seen in terms of the three constitutions of **Vata, Pitta** and **Kapha**.

A **Vata** menstrual cycle will involve a low volume of blood and a scanty flow, perhaps with breaks to the flow and then the onset of blood again. The discharge will be of a dark, brownish colour and periods can be painful. The cycle in general will be irregular, with some monthly periods being missed. The vayu which is acting on the body during the menstrual period is the apana vayu and when this flow is obstructed the tendency for the blood is to flow upwards; hence no blood at all and it is this apana vayu which needs to be treated.

The treatment of a vata menstrual cycle is to soothe vata. This can be done in many ways and should be done during the whole month not just at the time of the menstrual period. Warm Abhyanga oil application is one of the best treatments for vitiated vata; this should not be done at the time of the period but at other times of the month. The frequency will depend on other problems the individual may have and also lifestyle constraints but in some cases a daily oil application may be needed. Vata pacifying foods

should also be eaten, such as warm, spicy food. Cold food should be avoided in order not to increase vata more.

A **Pitta** menstrual cycle involves an excessive and very heavy flow of blood. The blood is bright red and may involve some clotting. The menstrual period lasts for about five to seven days. The menstrual period can also frequently come early. Before the onset of the menses, there will be irritated and inflamed skin.

The treatment of a pitta menstrual cycle is to soothe the vitiated pitta. A pitta pacifying diet should be taken. Hot, spicy foods should be avoided and more cooling foods eaten. As has also been previously noted, anger can also increase the pitta dosha in a menstrual period; breathing techniques or pranayama can be practised to ease the anger. Sitali is an excellent cooling breath. The tongue is curled and the air taken in through the tongue to the mouth, this is then exhaled through the nose. Abhyanga warm oil application is also beneficial but coconut oil should be used due to the cooling nature of the oil.

A **Kapha** menstrual cycle involves a moderate flow of light, red blood. There are often clots and the blood is thick in nature. Breasts are swollen before and during the menstrual period; and tiredness and heaviness is felt. There may also be weight gain before the period due to water retention.

The treatment of a kapha vitiated menstrual cycle would be to soothe kapha. Abhyanga warm oil application can again be done at other times of the month and plenty of exercise, also at other times other than when the menstrual period is on, should be done. Spicy food can be eaten, but sweet foods should be avoided.

A menstrual cycle can of course have elements of all three doshas present and in conclusion then it is important to lead a balanced lifestyle all year round. This will help to balance the mind and body in general and lead to less health problems in general and of course a healthier menstrual cycle.

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