MENSTRUAL CYCLE: AN AYURVEDIC PROSPECTIVE
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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. The 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 Rituvyatitkaala. 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, yonivyapata, bandhya etc. as mentioned in Ayurveda.

Key words: rituchakra, rajahsravakaala, aartavadushti, yonivyapata, menstruation.

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, yonivyapata, bandhya etc. as mentioned in Ayurveda.

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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 (ap-anavayu). 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 indragopana.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 (rajashwalachharya) has also been mentioned. Coitus specially has been contraindicated by all the acharyas during this phase of ritualakra.16 This phase according to modern concept is the phase of menstrual flow which represents that the fertilisation did not occur during the secretary phase, so the superficial two-third of the endometrium is shed and a new cycle begins.17

Ritukaala

Ritukaala is that phase of ritualakra 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 ritualaka 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 ritualaka has been explained very well as follows: 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 impotant Ksharkarma and nasya have also been contraindiacated 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 on-set 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.

Pittajaartavadushti- 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.

Kaphajaartavadushti- The artava vitiated by kapha becomes whitish or slightly yellowish in colour, appears as if mixed with bone marrow, becomes very thick, slippery or lubricious, 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. Nashtarava- 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. Artavaativriddhi- The patient suffering with artava- ativriddhi has generalised bodyache, excessive bleeding during menses and foul smell in menstrual blood. 29

5. Asrigdara or Pradara- Due to pra-deerana (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 discolouration.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 yoni (uterus). This yoni 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 yonivyapat- 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 yoni, which obstructs the passage of raja (menstrual blood).40

14. Shandi yonivyapat—The woman suffering from shandiyoni 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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