

# Ayurvedic Nutritional Interventions for Menstrual and Reproductive Health: A Narrative Review

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## Abstract

*Menstrual health is a reflection of a woman's reproductive health. A proper understanding of menstrual patterns helps in assessing women's overall health. The menstrual period is a vital process involving endometrial regeneration and the initiation of follicular growth, which ultimately builds the foundation for a healthy offspring. Ayurveda describes various unique regimens for women. Adherence to these regimens helps prevent and manage growing menstrual disorders and infertility, along with the enhancement of reproductive and overall health. The search was conducted on electronic databases, such as PubMed, ScienceDirect, and Google Scholar, to explore published literature with the keywords "nutrition," "menstruation," "reproductive health," and "Ayurveda" in different combinations. The studies were screened for eligibility based on their relevance. Additionally, classical texts of Ayurveda and other ancient texts were explored for relevant information. The consumption of nutritious food alone does not suffice nutritional needs; it requires optimal Agni (digestive/metabolic factors) for its absorption and assimilation. Food habits suggested in Rajaswala Paricharya (menstrual regimen), such as Havisyas (a combination of ghee, Shali rice, and milk), help to keep Agni in balance and promote stability. Regimens for pregnant (Garbhini) and puerperal (Sutika) women, along with guidelines on wholesome and unwholesome diets (Pathya-apathya) for various diseases, are advised in Ayurvedic texts. Apart from these, individual Prakriti (body constitution) and Vikriti (pathological state) can also be taken into consideration while planning the diet regimen for a woman throughout the month or according to the phases of the menstrual cycle. Age-wise food regimens can be planned as per the physiologic needs of a woman in different stages of life. Ayurveda offers a wide scope of food regimens that can be planned not just during the menstrual period but also for the prevention and management of diseased conditions and for the promotion of women's reproductive and overall health.*

**Keywords:** Nutrition, menstruation, reproduction, Ayurveda, Rajaswala Paricharya

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## INTRODUCTION

The concept that food can serve as medicine is a foundational principle in many traditional health systems. The *Bhagavad Gita* mentions food as the source for the creation of life [1]. It serves as a source of energy, forms reserves for the future, affects mood, provides the basis for the formation of hormones and immunoglobulins, and supports growth, immunity, and bodily sustenance. It is a primary tool for healing and maintaining health. Food directly impacts the body's balance of the three *Doshas* (regulatory functional factors of the body). Epigenetics, an emerging concept with parallels in Ayurveda, involves the regulation of gene expression to restore balance. This is achieved by effectively managing factors such as diet, digestion, lifestyle, behavior, stress, and the environment. According to Ayurveda,

the nourishment derived from ingested food progresses sequentially through the bodily tissues. It first sustains *Rasa* (plasma), followed by *Rakta* (blood), *Mamsa* (muscle), *Meda* (adipose tissue), *Asthi* (bone), *Majja* (marrow), and ultimately culminates in the formation of *Sukra/Artava* (reproductive elements). The essence of all these tissues forms *Oja* (vital essence), which is related to immunity. In Ayurveda, dietary recommendations are individualized and adapt according to seasonal variations, environmental conditions, and the individual's age, physical strength, and *Prakriti* (body constitution).

## AYURVEDIC PERSPECTIVE ON FEMALE NUTRITION

Female physiology is more complex than male physiology, primarily due to the unique capacity for reproduction. Various changes occur around menarche, monthly vaginal bleeding, pregnancy, postpartum, contraception, and menopause. Hormonal variations and the associated bodily changes during these life stages can compromise physical and mental status. Even the interplay of hormones differs within a month with the phases of the menstrual cycle, which affects moods and daily activities. All these phases might have varied nutritional needs.

While reproductive capacity is a natural aspect of female life, and many women navigate these changes graciously, others face significant challenges. Some are unable to tackle these alterations and suffer from many conditions ranging from premenstrual symptoms, dysmenorrhea, menometrorrhagia, uterine fibroids, endometriosis, adenomyosis, infertility, and mental disorders. Ayurveda has explained various regimens – food habits and lifestyle changes – for these crucial stages of a woman's life that help to balance the *doshas* and navigate these phases smoothly without any complications. These include *Rajashwala Paricharya* (menstrual regimen), *Garbhini Paricharya* (pregnancy regimen), and *Sutika Paricharya* (puerperal regimen). Apart from these, by integrating the knowledge of Ayurveda with advancements in modern dietetics and a better understanding of female physiology and pathologies, more personalized diet regimens can be derived for women of different ages and life stages to fulfill their nutritional needs and to prevent and manage associated health challenges. This review focuses on nutritional regimens and related practices, particularly concerning the menstrual health of women in their reproductive years.

In the modern era, women often balance careers and household responsibilities, which can make it difficult to prioritize their health and adhere to the regimens described in Ayurveda. This trend has been associated with an increase in menstrual problems, other gynecological disorders, and infertility. *Rajaswala Paricharya* is a unique regimen for menstruating women, adherence to which can improve their menstrual, reproductive, and overall health. It also helps address the growing problem of infertility, mostly by preventing it [2]. The regimen is mentioned in various Ayurvedic texts such as *Charaka Samhita*, *Sushruta Samhita*, *Kashyapa Samhita*, *Ashtanga Hridaya*, *Ashtanga Sangraha*, and *Bhavaprakasha*.

### Dietary Basis of *Artava* Formation

In Ayurveda, *Artava* is considered an *Upadhatu* (the minor structural components that stabilize and sustain the body) of *Rasa*, which is formed from *Ahararasa* (the nutritive product formed from properly digested food). The nutrition for the *Beeja* (gamete) is consequently derived from ingested food. As Ayurveda focuses primarily on *Agni* (digestive fire), the dietary principle given is *Deepana* (digestion and metabolism enhancing), *Pachana* (enhancing digestion), and *Vatanulomana* (proper functioning of *Vayu*). This principle maintains *Agni* and promotes the proper flow of *Artava*. Food is to be taken in the proper quantity and at regular mealtimes. It is advised to avoid spicy, sour, and salty food [3]. *Katu Rasa* (pungent taste) has thrombolytic activity [4]. Consequently, bleeding may continue as abnormal uterine bleeding due to a failure of platelet aggregation. Additionally, spicy, and oily diets, bakery products, and junk foods are to be avoided.

### Dietary Regimen in *Rajashwala Paricharya*

Specially prepared meals, like *Havishya* [5, 6] (a combination of ghee, *Shali* rice, and milk) and *Yawaka* (a mix of barley and milk), are cooked in clay utensils, which have a cooling effect. *Havishya* plays a significant role in enhancing *Agni*. Barley and milk are easily digestible, making them suitable for

menstruating women [7]. Barley (*Hordeum vulgare*) is known for its properties of improving digestion, reducing toxins, and balancing *Vata*, which promotes regular bowel movements and overall stability [8]. Barley is an excellent source of dietary fiber, antioxidants, and minerals. It has phenolic compounds that exhibit significant antiproliferative effects on HepG2 human liver cancer cells [9]. The soluble fiber in barley promotes the growth of beneficial gut bacteria, which produce short-chain fatty acids that help reduce inflammation in the gut. Most of the fiber in barley is insoluble in water. Therefore, it adds bulk to stool and speeds up intestinal movement, helping to reduce the risk of constipation [10].

Similarly, milk, which is considered sweet and soothing, provides strength to the body and is especially helpful in cases of weakness or injury [11]. This property may help repair the shedding endometrium. It is advised for menstruating women to eat from an unbroken vessel placed in the hand, preferably made of clay. Clay possesses natural alkaline properties that help neutralize food acids and support optimal digestion. It is also enriched with essential minerals, including calcium, phosphorus, magnesium, iron, copper, and manganese, in bioavailable proportions, contributing to overall health. As a traditional cookware material, clay effectively preserves micronutrients during cooking without leaching harmful substances. The use of clay pots not only maintains the nutritional integrity of food but also supports immune function, underscoring their relevance in contemporary dietary practices [12]. It is recommended that menstruating women eat simple, freshly made, hot meals. The addition of spices, such as ginger, cardamom, cumin, coriander, and cinnamon, are also recommended. Maintaining hydration with warm teas, such as ginger tea, lemon tea with honey, or teas made with cumin, coriander, and fennel, are also advised.

Apart from the dietary aspect of the regimen, individual *Prakriti* can also be taken into consideration while planning the diet regimen for a woman. For example, *Havisya*, which is *Madhura* (sweet taste) dominant, may not be suitable for a *Kapha Prakriti* person or a diabetic woman. The *Prakriti* may be responsible for the likelihood of developing a certain disease. A *Vata Prakriti* woman is more prone to developing pain during menstruation, while a *Pitta Prakriti* woman is more susceptible to mood variations. Anemia due to heavy bleeding, nutritional needs in premature menopause, and probable overnutrition or obstructive pathology in PCOS must be addressed individually.

## HERBAL SUPPORT FOR MENSTRUAL HEALTH

Herbs can be used based on the *Doshas* involved. In a *Vatika* (*Vata* dominant) cycle, *Dasamoola* is particularly effective in pacifying *Vata dosha*. Dry ginger aids in managing *Vatika* imbalances and associated discomfort. Herbs are especially helpful for balancing *Pitta* (the *Dosha* responsible for regulating body temperature and metabolic activities). For example, *Ashoka* (*Saraca asoca* (Roxb.)) helps tone the uterus and alleviates heavy flow. Herbs, like *Shatavari* (*Asparagus racemosus*), *Amalaki* (*Emblica officinalis*), *Guduchi* (*Tinospora cordifolia*), *Kumari* (*Aloe vera*), and *Brahmi* (*Bacopa monnieri*), are well-known for their *Pitta*-calming properties and are beneficial in managing *Paitik* flow. Spices, such as cinnamon, cardamom, and black pepper, are useful in a *Kaphaja* (*Kapha* dominant) cycle due to their ability to stimulate *Agni*. A castor oil pack, with its warm and penetrating qualities, can help break up stagnation in the pelvis. Several herbs, such as *Amalaki*, *Shatavari*, *Nagakesara* (*Mesua ferrea*), and *Ashoka*, have been shown to be highly effective in treating menstrual irregularities.

In the non-menstruating period, it is directed that women consume a diet with properties as advised in *Dinacharya* (daily regimen) and *Ritucharya* (seasonal regimen) as per their *Prakriti*, *Dosha*, *Desha* (place), *Kala* (time), and *Agni*. In the case of any pathological condition, it is recommended that women consult an Ayurvedic physician who will perform *Nidana Parivarjana* (avoidance of causative factors) and prescribe *Pathya* for the specific condition.

## EMERGING NUTRITIONAL APPROACHES IN FEMALE REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH

Seed cycling, also known as the seed rotation diet, is a method that focuses on balancing hormones and improving female reproductive health. It involves eating different seeds during the follicular and luteal phases of the menstrual cycle to affect estrogen and progesterone levels. Pumpkin and flax seeds are consumed in the follicular phase to help control estrogen levels. In the luteal phase, sesame, and

sunflower seeds are eaten to promote progesterone production and assist with estrogen clearance. Although many people use seed cycling to address menstrual irregularities, infertility, menopausal symptoms, and PCOS, there is still limited scientific support for this practice, which is mostly based on anecdotal evidence [13].

Ayurnutrigenomics is a unique concept of an Ayurveda-inspired approach to customized nutrition. It is the integration of Ayurgenomics with the idea of *Pathya* and *Ahara* in Ayurveda. Personalized diets are planned as per the genetic variability (*Prakriti*) for the preventive, curative, and promotive aspects of health, considering nutrient-gene interactions [14].

### **Ayurvedic Dietary Dynamics: Influence of *Agni* and *Dosha***

During adolescence and the menstruating years, *Pitta Dosha* is dominant. If not in balance, it may lead to multiple disorders like thyroid imbalance, cardiac disorders, hypertension, insomnia, mood swings, and mental disorders. Women may specifically suffer from dysmenorrhea, menometrorrhagia, amenorrhea, endometriosis, fibroids, PCOS, and anovulation, affecting their health, well-being, education, and career. Therefore, keeping *Pitta* in balance with the proper functioning of *Agni* is crucial for the formation of sufficient *Dhatus* (major structural components of the body) and the regulation of reproductive health. Although the diet advocated in Ayurveda for menstruating women may seem nutrition deficient, it balances *Doshas* and promotes metabolism, ensuring the nutritional value ingested is properly assimilated and absorbed in the body. A large intake of food, even if it is rich in nutrition, may not be absorbed if *Agni* is malfunctioning; instead, it may lead to the formation of *Ama* (undigested material) and numerous subsequent diseases.

*Agni* and nutritional needs vary with age. Menstrual function is influenced by a specific body weight and can, therefore, be affected by nutritional factors; primarily, attaining a certain weight threshold helps girls to achieve menarche [15]. Pubertal and adolescent girls may have increasing nutritional needs for their reproductive and complete growth. A specific pre-conceptional diet can be planned for women of reproductive age who are planning a pregnancy to ensure they are fit for reproduction and to promote a potent *Beeja* for *Supraja* (healthy progeny). Foods and cosmetics with xenoestrogens are always to be avoided. In later ages, a diet with a *Rasayana* (rejuvenative) effect should be planned to preserve tissues through nutrition and help women cope with perimenopausal changes.

### **CONCLUSION**

While modern dietetics focuses primarily on nutritional adequacy, Ayurveda offers a different perspective. Apart from nutrition, its focus is on the nature of food, time, and way of intake, process of cooking, time, environment, adaptability to food, and most importantly, *Agni*. It focuses on the balance of *Doshas* and *Agni* so that even the lightest food taken serves to ensure smooth bodily functioning, aiding the proper metabolism of the foods ingested in the later phases of the cycle. Adherence to the menstrual regimen makes the reproductive years of women smooth. Furthermore, the knowledge of Ayurveda allows for the planning of individualistic regimens according to genetic makeup (*Prakriti*) and other changing individual aspects to achieve optimal reproductive and comprehensive health.

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