

PRECONCEPTION - AN INTEGRATED APPROACH WITH AYURVEDA

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Abstract

Ayurveda the philosophical knowledge of life takes care of all aspects of human well-being and adopting it is a valuable first step towards becoming a truly integrated individual. It gives great importance for the preconceptional care which includes preparing the body of both the individuals, rather than postconceptional care so as to ensure a healthy and successful progeny. The Ayurvedic preconceptional care begins with the selection of the right partner, both constitutional and age wise. It then explains about the right mode of conception and the importance of food and water in establishing a firm foundation from the very beginning of pregnancy. This article aims at achieving a healthy motherhood, a successful progeny and a happy society through Ayurveda and simple diet modification.

Key words: Pre-conceptional care; Diet; Vajikarana; Panchakarma; Yoga.

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INTRODUCTION

Planned Parenthood

Making the decision to have a child is momentous. It is to decide forever to have your heart go walking around outside your body.^[1] Ayurveda – philosophical knowledge of life.^[2] It is not only a medicine system, it is a holistic way of life that takes care of all aspects of human well-being-physical, mental and spiritual. Adopting the Ayurvedic way of life is a valuable first step towards becoming a truly integrated individual.

Ayurveda, a science of Life,' is a 5000 year old wisdom passed down from sages with origins in the Asian subcontinent teaching us that life is lived at its fullest by balanced health. According to Ayurveda, health is a state of mind with the body and mind working together in harmony. Ayurvedic principles are guided by the belief that what is within is that which is without (i.e the universe). Our body has all the five basic elements found in the Universe like the Earth, Water, Fire, Air and Ether. When all these elements are in balance and working together, the mind and the body achieve the highest state of existence.

Ayurveda treatments are geared towards cleansing the person from within via reducing toxins, hence enhancing metabolism, strengthening the immunity and regulating bowel movements. Ayurveda therefore promotes the ability to fight the everyday stresses and diseases of human life so that the possibility of a cure from within is more permanent.

Ayurveda gives great importance to the preparation of both partners prior to conception. The birth of a healthy child is seen as equivalent to planting a tree, for which we need a seed, soil, time and the right nourishment. This approach can be seen as the ultimate in preventative medicine with

actions a few months prior to conception having lifelong effects for your child.

Assessment and screening

It is intended to assess normal health of a child-bearing woman, while at the same time identifying:

- Existing or emerging illness or disease which may have gone undetected before, and
- Existing risks for the woman who may become pregnant, and
- Existing risks which may affect a fetus if the woman does become pregnant.
- Pre-conception counseling in the United States is recommended to include^[3] Height and weight to calculate BMI
- Blood pressure
- Medical history
- Abdominal and pelvic examination
- Rubella screening
- Varicella screening
- Domestic violence screening
- Depression screening
- Testing for Gonorrhea and Chlamydia for women at high risk for STDs

Ayurvedic preconception care

Age for marriage

Male at the age of twenty five and female at the age of sixteen are fully mature, hence they should attempt for achievement of conception.^[4] As both the partners are full of valour and vigor at this age, the born child also possesses these qualities. Chances of neural canal defect in the fetus of a girl of fifteen years or less and increasing incidence of Down syndrome in first pregnancy after thirty years onwards age of woman are noted.^[5]

This begins with the right partner

It recommends choosing someone with a different constitution to your own to help

balance out the qualities in your children. For example, a Vata dominant person has a tendency of dry, rough skin. A Kapha dominant person has oily skin. Any offspring of this union is likely to have normal skin as the dryness and roughness of Vata is neutralised by the oiliness of Kapha. On the other hand, if both parents are Vata dominant, the child is very likely to have rough, dry skin. Working out which doshas you are both dominant in, may also help you understand each other better, in that your approach to life and child rearing may be different.^[3]

Just as a healthy seed bears healthy fruit, if the parent's sperm and ovum are pure then the child is more likely to inherit a strong constitution and immunity.^[6] Conversely if parents conceive when mentally or physically weak this may impact negatively on the child's condition. With the intention of giving their child the happiest and healthiest genetic inheritance Ayurveda suggests parents to observe a preconception regime called vajikaranam. The ancient text Charaka Samhita explains, the aim of vajikaranam is to enable a couple to produce healthy progeny who can assist them to perform their life's mission (dharma).^[7] About six months before conception an Ayurvedic physician prescribes a personalised purification and rejuvenation regime for the couple to ensure optimal ovum and sperm quality and quantity.^[7]

The first step is to detoxify the body (known as Panchakarma).^[8] Ayurveda recognises 6 types of body tissues in which the health of the reproductive cells of both men and female are dependent. The health of all tissues is dependant on having good digestion (or 'agni') which controls how well we assimilate food into the body. Hence, the first step in producing healthy sperm and eggs is to ensure digestion is working well. This is achieved through a deep internal cleansing to balance the doshas and remove toxins (known as ama), ensuring digestion works optimally.^[9] Reducing toxicity in the body is especially

important. Research has consistently shown that chemical pesticides reduce sperm count.^[2]

Ayurveda advises the best position for conceiving is with the women lying on her back. The couple should also be in a happy mood after intercourse, they are advised to take a cool bath or shower and have a restorative drink of warm milk with saffron. Sex should be avoided after overeating; with any negative feelings or with a longing for someone else; with someone who hasn't had sex for a long time, who is chronically sick or who is suffering from obesity; and with menstruating women, or those suffering any gynaecological disorders.^[4]

Love is the best libido booster to set the mood according to Ayurvedic sage Charaka who says "the best aphrodisiac for a man is a woman who loves him."^[5] Ayurvedic texts warn that it is detrimental to conceive at certain times including after a heavy meal, within 96 hrs of the menstrual period, during dawn or dusk, at midnight, on a full moon, new moon, fasting days and when the woman is bleeding.^[10] Days considered lucky for conception are on the 6th, 7th, 8th, 9th, 10th, 12th, 14th and 15th days after the end of the menses.^[11] If you have a gender preference, Charaka states conceiving on an odd day will produce a daughter and an even day a son.^[12] To optimise the man's sperm volume and motility it is best if he can conserve his sperm for three to seven days before the conception day. Because the couples' consciousness partially determines the type of soul attracted to them and imbues the zygote with its first subtle influence it is recommended that they elevate their spirits and connect with divine grace by meditation, offerings or rituals. On this significant day they should feel contented and deeply connected. If either feels thirsty, hungry, fearful, sad or angry it is better to wait. After preparing the 'love nest', bathing, dressing in fresh white garments and applying essential oils and flower garlands they can

recite the following prayer from Charaka Samhita in unison.^[13]

In vedas it is mentioned as “O creator and the cosmic truth Please bless us with a courageous/strong child with a long life and health, with the qualities of Brahma (power to create), Brhaspati (power to alter the future), Vishnu (power to maintain), Soma (power to flourish), Surya (power to be succeed), Mitra (power to love) and Varuna (power to nurture)”.

Ahara (Diet)

According to Taitiriya Upanishad, Food is Brahma. All beings originate from food and is responsible for life of all living beings.^[14] Diet is a critical key to successful conception for both partners. A good diet and lifestyle is critical for at least six months before trying to conceive for both partners.^[7] Nature tries in every way possible to ensure the survival of a new life, but the poor nutrition and stress of today’s culture seems to be at the root of most fertility problems.

So Dietary Management and healthy lifestyle will benefit you maintaining in complete health – which is the aim of Ayurveda

Ayurvedic fertility programme (Garbhadhan Samskara)

Once the body has been nourished by the healthy diet and lifestyle, general tonics and fertility enhancing herbs can be intaken. These herbs can also help offset the effects of stress in today’s busy lifestyles. Shatavari (*Asparagus racemosus*) is a powerful fertility enhancing herb, whose name means ‘she who has a hundred husbands’. Ashwagandha (*Withania somnifera*)^[15] is a highly rejuvenating herb that both promotes semen production and strengthens the uterus. Its name refers to it giving one the strength of a horse, and it acts as a natural aphrodisiac. Chyvanaprash is a delicious traditional Indian

nutritional elixir made from around 40 different herbs, ghee and honey. Its main ingredients is Amalaki (*Embllica officinalis*), a powerful antioxidant. It has been used in India to promote immunity, strength and fertility.^[15]

Looking at diet, parents should aim to follow a Yogic Diet of organic, whole foods for 1-3 months prior to conception. If they are overweight it is worth shedding excess pounds before conception. The following foods are deemed to specifically nourish reproductive tissues: Saffron (*Crocus sativus*), cloves (*Syzygium aromaticum*), cardamom (*Elettaria cardamomum*), nutmeg (*Myristica gronov*) and cinnamon (*Cinnamomum zeylanicum*), ghee, milk and date smoothies; and *Asparagus*. Spices such as ajwain and cumin also purify the uterus and genitourinary tract, whereas turmeric improves interaction between hormones and their target tissues. General female tonics include Shatavari (*Asparagus racemosus*), Ashoka (*Saraca indica*) etc.^[15] and general reproductive tonic foods like warm unhomogenised milk, ghee, yoghurt, black sesame seeds, urad dal, mung dal, honey, dates, almonds, ginger, garlic, onions and saffron. Hot spices should be avoided.^[16] Daily self massage and sufficient rest is observed to charge the body with positive hormones, good nutrition is an essential component for attaining a healthy pregnancy, women planning for pregnancy should maintain good nutritional status prior to the conception. This will help to minimise health risks of both mother and infant. A woman must establish higher nutritional status that will essentially nourish herself and her embryo. An inadequate amount of energy and mineral stare may have a negative effect right from ovulation, menses and also cause challenges in the beginning of pregnancy.

Basic need for nutrition starts before implantation and is fulfilled from the fluid in the uterus. The embryonic period is most important, as the rapid cell division and

differentiation takes place during this period. Within 2 weeks of conception the blastocyst gets implanted in the lining of uterus called endometrium. Shortly thereafter the embryonic and the maternal tissue begin to form placenta. Upto the formation of placenta (which takes several days to be fully functional), the need of nutrition is fulfilled by endometrium.

Nearly by 4 weeks the organogenesis starts, head, body arms start to develop and heart start to beat. Just 2 week succession liver starts synthesising blood cells. All the vital activities start before the complete functioning of the placenta. So the alternative source in the endometrium and the dependence on endometrium for nutrition at the beginning of life outlines how important it is for a woman to be well nourished before she conceives. Only after 8th week, when heart and blood circulation develops, the placenta takes over as the main energy source.

How important is drinking plenty of good quantity of water

Getting plenty of water each day is very important for a good and safe pregnancy. It facilitates proper blood flow and also ensures effective flushing of toxins out of the body, there by maintaining good hydration level. It also replenishes the amniotic fluid.

If the mother is not taking adequate water, there are chances of dehydration which can lead to contraction of muscles causing miscarriage. Chlorine and fluoride water is to be avoided as it detriment health and fertility.

Nutritional advices for a preconception

Food and water is the base for life process to occur in the body and it is important to establish a firm foundation from the very beginning of pregnancy.

Certain important points are dealt in priority

- **Balanced diet:** Before you get pregnant get habit of eating balanced nutritional diet.
- **Water:** Get plenty of water each day throughout your pregnancy
- **Folic acid:** Folic acid is a B vitamin and it is shown that mothers need higher than normal amount in order to reduce the risk of neural tube defects (e.g. *Spina bifida*) in the infant. Women who are pregnant or who are planning a pregnancy should supplement with 0.4 mg of folic acid every day, and continue to do so for the first 12 weeks of pregnancy. Women who have previously had a baby with a neural tube defect or who are on drug therapy for epilepsy are often prescribed higher doses of 5mg per day (consult your doctor). In addition, expectant mother are encouraged to ensure their diet includes foods which are rich in folate, including citrus fruits and juices, dark green leafy vegetables, legumes and whole grain, as well as good amount of food which are fortified with additional folic acids, e.g. fortified breads, breakfast cereals and yeast extract.
- **Vitamin A:** High levels of some forms of vitamin A can harm baby's development, if taken too high amounts during pregnancy. Mothers therefore should avoid vitamin A supplements and food rich in animal forms of vitamin A. for e.g. liver through out their pregnancy
- **Iron:** Important to have iron rich foods during pregnancy. Both animal and plant sources are encouraged.
- **Calcium:** Important to form healthy bones. Eat food rich in calcium, aim 1000 mg per day
- **Nuts:** Expected mother should avoid nuts, peanuts and nut products in order

to reduce the risk of your child developing a nut or pea nut allergy. This is especially important if the mother suffers from asthma, eczema or hay fever

- Oily fish: Good intake of essential fats is important during pregnancy, too much of oily fish that may contain high levels of mercury is not advised. It is therefore suggested that an expectant mother limits herself to two portions of oily fish per week.
- Alcohol: Although there may be no harm in consuming a little alcoholic preparations during pregnancy, the current recommendation is for an expectant mother should avoid alcohol altogether
- Tea/Coffee: High caffeine consumption has been linked to an increased risk of miscarriage, so it is probably wise to limit caffeine. Cut down to a maximum of one or two cups of tea or coffee per day. More recent studies have linked green tea to the lowering of folic acid level, so try to avoid green tea while trying to conceive and during the first 12 weeks of pregnancy; after 3 months, 1-2 cups of green tea will be fine.
- Healthy Weight: The ideal weight gain is 9-13 kg during pregnancy. Excess gain is difficult to lose afterwards. If you are overweight prior to pregnancy, then eat healthy and wisely during pregnancy to minimise further weight gain.
- Food safety: Ensure safety of food to prevent food poisoning. As pregnancy impairs mother's immune system, food poisoning bacteria like salmonella and listeria are even more of an issue. Avoid raw eggs, unpasteurized milk, unpasteurized cheeses, raw or under cooked meats or fish.
- Rich fiber diet: It prevents constipation and keeps your bowel healthy

- Fried and spicy foods: Should be avoided to prevent heartburn and to reduce morning sickness.

Preconceptional advices for men

Men are advised to take virilizing herbs such as Ashwagandha (*Withania somnifera*), Sariba (*Hemidesmus indicus*) and Kapikachu (*Mucuna pruriens*), Shilajitu etc. There are also many compound formulations for optimum fertility. Male fertility has equal weight age in pregnancy. Male partners should also get the best possible start for pregnancy. It is essential to eat a balanced healthy diet with fresh fruits, green leafy vegetables, plenty of water and avoid having processed food as it contains flavors and additives which have a direct effect on health and fertility. Reduce coffee intake as it decreases sperm count. Avoid other habits like alcoholism, smoking, pan intake for better outcome.

Yoga

As stress is a major cause of reduced fertility in both sexes, taking steps to relax body and mind is also a key. The practice of yoga Nidra can be especially helpful in providing a systematic method of inducing complete physical, mental and emotional relaxation.

CONCLUSION

Diet plays a key role for the successful conception. A good diet and lifestyle is to be maintained by both partners for at least three months before planning for a good progeny. Just as a healthy seed bears healthy fruit, the first step in producing healthy sperm and eggs is achieved through a deep internal cleansing to balance the doshas and remove toxins (known as ama) by detoxifying the body (known as Panchakarma). Pathya apathya sevana is equally important for both partners especially males by keeping away from alcoholism, smoking etc. Who indulges daily in healthy foods and activities, who

discriminates (the good and bad of everything and then acts wisely), who is not attached (too much) to the objects of the senses, who develops the habit of charity, considering all as equal (requiring kindness), truthfulness, pardoning and keeping company with good persons, only becomes free from all diseases. Thus Ayurveda has strong base to maintain Rhythm between human being and universe. Rhythm is defined as the delicate balance and the natural harmony which exist between galaxies and Constellations, between plants & satellites, between natures of all forms of life. All these together makes universe. So in Universe which ever is kept really in balance of harmony that particular force is known as Rhythm. There everything in Universe is maintained by the particular force which is keeping the natural force that is the one. The three types of medicines from heaven are pure air, pure light and pure water. Again the three type of medicines form air are curative, maintenance & preventive aspect. So this Rhythm is responsible for maintaining the entire environment. Need of current situation: All systems of medicine, whether traditional or modern, should act as complementary and supplementary to each other for alleviating the miseries and giving solace to the suffering humanity. Preconception advices mentioned by sages can be milestones in achieving healthy female, healthy motherhood, healthy childrens and happy society.

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