



Review Article

## NURTURING THE MIND IN MOTHERHOOD: ROLE OF DIETARY PRINCIPLES DESCRIBED IN AYURVEDA FOR MATERNAL MENTAL HEALTH

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### ABSTRACT

Pregnancy is a sensitive and transformative phase in a woman's life that requires special care for her wellbeing -both physically and mentally. Globally, mental health problems affect nearly 10% of pregnant women, with a higher prevalence of about 15.9% in developing countries, as reported by World Health Organization. Maternal psychological distress can adversely influence fetal growth and development by impairing the mother's ability to cope with the daily activities. Poor maternal nutrition further increases stress levels, while mental health disturbances can disrupt appetite and lifestyle. Therefore, a balanced and nutritious diet is vital for ensuring maternal health and optimal foetal development. Ayurveda emphasizes this through *Masanumasika Garbhini Paricharya* (month wise dietic regimen), designed to provide sustained nutritional and energy support during pregnancy and the lactation period to follow. A closer evaluation of these dietary guidelines reveals that our Acharyas carefully addressed both the physical demands psychological challenges of pregnancy, ensuring emotional stability, along with nourishment. Acharya Sushruta highlights the importance of maintaining a positive and cheerful mental state from the onset of pregnancy as emotional tranquillity of the mother is considered fundamental for a healthy uterine environment. This article seeks to examine the role of Ayurvedic pregnancy-specific dietary principles in promoting maternal mental health.

### INTRODUCTION

Pregnancy, a crucial yet beautiful phase in a woman's life is often accompanied by significant physical and emotional challenges that interfere with daily functioning. The World Health Organization reports that approximately 10% of pregnant women and 13% of women post-partum, experience mental health disorders.<sup>[1]</sup> Impaired maternal mental health adversely affects overall functioning and may worsen after childbirth, thereby influencing the growth and development of the child. Nearly all women remain vulnerable with factors such as poverty, exposure to violence, stressful environment and inadequate social support, increasing susceptibility.<sup>[1]</sup>

Maternal psychological disturbances have been associated with adverse obstetric and neonatal outcomes, including complications of pregnancy, low fetal birthweight, long term neurodevelopmental and psychological disorders. It takes a toll on the mother in the form of mood swings, sleep disturbances, fatigue, avoidance towards partner and child and even disorders like depression and anxiety, and in the long run may develop into postpartum psychosis (PPP) and suicidal ideations<sup>[2]</sup>. Studies indicate that suicidal ideation is seen in nearly 10% of pregnant women and about 7% during the postpartum period<sup>[3]</sup>, with Indian data showing a prevalence of 7.6% in early pregnancy<sup>[4]</sup>. The overall prevalence of Post Partum Depression (PPD) is 22% in India, which is the most neglected condition, harming both the mother and the child<sup>[5]</sup>. Although in the recent years, post-partum mental health conditions such as PPD have gained recognition, preventive care must begin right from the beginning of pregnancy. Maternal mental well-being is very much essential in shaping the psychological

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health of the foetus. Since ages, the nutritional interventions given during the pregnancy period is mainly focused on the growth and development of the foetus, but we should not ignore the fact that adequate nutrition is equally vital for maintaining maternal emotional balance. Poor nutrition for the mother, is the reason for exacerbation of pre-existing medical conditions, physical and mental exhaustion. Similarly, poor mental health interferes with the dietary habits and lifestyle of the mother. Thus, to improve the mental health of the mother and to attain emotional stability, the pregnant woman should eat well, socialize, meditate and exercise. This article examines the dietary principles recommended for the *Garbhini* (pregnant woman) in Ayurveda and have a look at their significance in the maintenance of the mental health of the mother.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

Relevant references from classical Ayurvedic texts along with their commentaries, were thoroughly reviewed to obtain classical descriptions and conceptual understanding. Furthermore, electronic databases including Google Scholar and PubMed used to retrieve and analyze the relevant review and research articles.

### Ayurvedic perspective on pregnancy nutrition

Ayurveda considers the *Shadgarbhakarabhava* (six procreative factors), whose combination is responsible for the formation of *Garbha* (pregnancy). Among these, the *Rasaja Bhava* (essence of the digested food) is responsible for nourishing the *Sookshmabhuta* in *Garbhasharira*. Charaka Samhita says the *Manasika* and *Sharirika Prakruthi* of the baby depends greatly on the *Garbha Griha*, *Matruja Ahara* and *Vihara*. A pregnant woman should consume foods that are easily digestible, warm, moist, and nourishing. *Garbhini* should consume *Hridya Ahara*, which are to her heart's content and also wholesome for her. Acharya Charaka states that the *Garbhini* desirous of producing an excellent progeny should give up non-congenial diet and mode of life. She should follow good conduct and manage herself with healthy diet and behavior<sup>[6]</sup>. In Sushruta Samhitha, she is advised

to take *Snigdha* (unctuous), *Madhura* (sweet), and *Drava* (liquid) as well as appetizing diets until delivery<sup>[7]</sup>. In *Ashtanga Hridaya* both internal and external use of *Jeevaniya* (Life-promoting) group of drugs is advised. For the maintenance of pregnancy, everyone around her should be affectionate towards her. She should always be supplied of things that she desires, which are good for her health and lots of milk, butter and ghee<sup>[8]</sup>. Kashyapa Samhita mentions that the foods consumed by mother becomes congenial to the foetus, therefore, it should be taken after careful consideration of the place of living, time or season, and digestive capacity of the mother<sup>[9]</sup>. This emphasizes the importance of foods that are pleasing and comfortable to the pregnant woman. Wholesome food enhances appetite and refreshes the mind. The use of warm water, milk and meat is also recommended.

### Masanumasika Garbhini paricharya

*Masanumasika Garbhini paricharya* is the month wise dietary regimen prescribed for pregnant woman. This includes intake of boiled and cooled milk, medicated milk, liquid, cold and sweet diet, wholesome diet in the morning and evening, cooked *Shashti* rice with curd, milk, butter, *Jangala mamsa rasa*, ghee, medicated ghee with *Vidarigandhadi* group of drugs, with *Gokshura* and unctuous gruels during various months of pregnancy<sup>[10,11]</sup>

### Ksheerapaka

Consumption of *Ksheerapaka*, a milk preparation processed with drugs are mentioned for each month of pregnancy. Different Acharyas have mentioned different methods of preparation of *Ksheerapakas*. Specific drugs are processed in milk which acts as a base with its *Madhura rasa*, *Snigdha guna*, *Sheeta Veerya*, *Madhura Vipaka*, *Ojasya* and *Dhatuwardhaka* properties to provide nourishing effects to the mother as well as foetus. The milk enhances the bioavailability of the chemical constituents present in the drugs without causing harm. Moreover milk consumption is found to have lower risk of anxiety and depression.<sup>[12]</sup> The drugs for *Ksheerapaka* for each month and their therapeutic actions are mentioned in Table 1.

**Table 1: Pharmacological activities of drugs mentioned for *Ksheerapaka* during each month of Pregnancy**

Month	Drug	Pharmacological activity
First month	<i>Bala</i>	Anti-stress, adaptogenic activity <sup>[13]</sup>
Second month	<i>Lakshmana</i>	Analgesic, anti-inflammatory, antidepressant, anxiolytic <sup>[14]</sup>
Third month	<i>Brihati</i>	Antioxidant, anti-inflammatory activity, anticancer, antimicrobial, CNS depressant activity <sup>[15]</sup>
Fourth month	<i>Amsumathi</i>	Antidepressant, mild CNS depressant activity <sup>[16]</sup>
Fifth month	<i>Amritha</i>	Anxiolytic, improves cognitive functions <sup>[17]</sup>
Sixth month	<i>Nidigdika</i>	Antidepressant, <sup>[18]</sup> antioxidant

Seventh month	<i>Yavaka</i>	Antidepressant, antioxidant, <sup>[19]</sup>
Eighth month	<i>Morada</i>	Skeletal muscle relaxant <sup>[20]</sup>
Ninth month	<i>Satavari</i>	Adaptogenic, antioxidant, antidepressant, neuroprotective <sup>[21]</sup>

## DISCUSSION

### The trimesters and mental health

During the first trimester, the psychological issues that may arise are anxiety, mood-swings, fear of miscarriage, morning sickness and hormonal shifts. Various studies show that anxiety and depressive symptoms can start early in pregnancy<sup>[22]</sup>. Ayurveda advices that the foods taken by the *Garbhini* for the first three months should include milk, *Madhura*, *Sheeta*, liquid diet, *Madhuyashti*, *Madhukapushpa* with butter, honey and sweet milk. These are *Snigdha*, *Sheeta*, and *Satvika* and so they help in enhancing the *Satva* and mental stability. The use of cold, sweet and liquid diet helps in preventing any dehydration that may occur due to the diet changes of the pregnant woman due to morning sickness. The stress and agitations caused by the *Vata* and *Pitta* are pacified as they provide nourishment to the *Dhatu*s and *Manas*. Milk and milk products are rich in tryptophan, calcium and omega 3 fatty acids that help in reducing neuroinflammation, and promotes the synthesis and regulation of neurotransmitters, which prevents worsening of psychological symptoms and elevates the mood. *Bala Ksheerakashaya* (*Sida cordifolia*) strengthens the nervous system and reduces stress. *Lakshmana* (*Ipomoea sepiaria*) has nourishing and calming properties. *Brihathi* (*Solanum indicum*) *Ksheerakashaya* can be made out of *Brihathi*, which has antioxidant properties and so reduces stress-related damage. Moreover, these preparations promote *Soumya guna* and imparts good sleep.

The second trimester possess issues like adjustment stress, body image concerns and increased emotional sensitivity. The diet prescribed for the next three months are milk with butter, *Shashti* rice and curd, *Hridya* food with milk, butter and *Jangala Mamsa*, medicated cooked rice, *Payasa*, ghee/ rice gruel with *Gokshura*, sweetened curd. These foods are also predominantly *Madhura Rasa*, *Snigdha* and *Sheeta*. They provide *Brimhana* (nourishing) effect, which is very much essential for this trimester where muscular growth is seen. It also reduces the irritability by reducing *Vata* and *Pitta Dosha*. Rice contains carbohydrates, which provides steady glucose for brain function, curd supports the gut microbiome and increases the synthesis of serotonin. *Amsumathi* (*Desmodium gangeticum*), *Amritha* (*Tinospora cordifolia*) and *Nidigdhika* (*Solanum xanthocarpum*) are the drugs mentioned for *Ksheerakashaya* for this trimester, whose antioxidant and antidepressant

effects help in attaining emotional stability at this stage.

The mental concerns for the third trimester would be anxiety about the labour and delivery, sleep disturbances, mood instability and so the perinatal depression risk increases. During the last trimester, the *Garbhini* should consume Ghee from milk from *Madhura* drugs, Ghee with *Prithakparnyadi* group, *Gritakhanta* (sweet), *Ksheerayavagu* mixed with ghee, *Snigdha Peya*, *Jangala Mamsa Rasa*, and different cereals. These food preparations are *Snigdha*, *Balya*, *Brimhana*, *Madhura Rasa* and *Vata Hara*. The unctuous foods provide essential fatty acids and phospholipids, and also promotes the actions of neurotransmitters. *Yavaka* (*Hordeum vulgare*) *Ksheerakashaya* supports digestion and gut health, which is linked to mood regulation can be consumed during this time. *Morada* (*Chonemorpha macrophylla*) reduces physical discomfort, indirectly supporting mental health. *Satavari* (*Asparagus racemosus*) *Ksheerakashaya* can be given which has adaptogenic and hormone-balancing action and it promotes emotional stability for the pregnant woman.

### Gut microbiota and mental health

The food taken by the *Garbhini* strongly influences the composition of gut microbiota. Healthy gut microbiota ferments the dietary fiber into short-chain fatty acids and thereby reduce neuroinflammation and promote neuroplasticity (the capacity of the brain to adapt and reorganize). The foods mentioned for a *Garbhini* include milk, ghee and butter in abundance, cereals, fruits and vegetables together with energy providing foods like *Peya*, *Shashtika* rice, *Mamsa* and *Mamsa rasa*. These foods are rich in vitamin B-Complex, iron, zinc and omega 3 fatty acids and they help in neurotransmitter synthesis, myelination and cognitive development. Fermented preparations are Gut-Brain Axis supporters. The gut microbiota also helps in the synthesis and regulation of neurotransmitters like serotonin, dopamine, and GABA and improves emotional regulation and stress resilience.

The presence of both aqueous and lipid components, enables milk to act as a dual solvent for polar and non-polar constituents, making it a highly significant dietary component in pregnancy. *Ksheerapakas* ensures bioavailability of the active constituents of the specific drugs which supports

hormonal balance, adaptogenic action, imparts sleep and calms the nervous system. Ayurveda nutraceuticals including *Medhya Dravya* like *Yashti*, enhances memory, anxiolytics, emotional stability, promotes neurotransmitter balance. *Gritha* preparations with *Medhya Dravya* can also be administered for mood disorders and emotional well-being. The *Madhura Gana* drugs used abundantly during every month of pregnancy are nourishing and memory enhancing. *Pridhakparyadi Gana*<sup>[23]</sup> has *Rasayana*, *Hridya* and *Medhya* effects, so they nourish nervous tissue, and improves cognitive function and emotional stability.

### Desired foods of the *Garbhini*

The cravings of the pregnant woman are generally influenced by the needs of the growing foetus. Fulfilling the cravings makes the mother feel emotionally satisfied, thereby, strengthening her bond with the baby. The suppression of desires leads to the vitiation of *Vata*, similar to that which happens in a situation of *Bhaya* and *Manakshobha*. Cravings should be satisfied even if unwholesome, by blending them with nourishing and wholesome ingredients for balance. Right food balances the *Tridoshas*. Eating wholesome foods and Mediterranean dietary patterns is associated with lower risk of depression<sup>[24]</sup>. The unwholesome food causes inflammation, oxidative stress, insulin resistance and vascular changes, resulting in diet-induced damage to the brain<sup>[25]</sup>. This is associated with the occurrence of depression and anxiety during pregnancy or even after delivery. The mental state affects the process of digestion as well as nutrient absorption. A happy and pleasant mind of the mother is essential for the proper development of the foetus. So, *Garbhini* should consume food calmly, in a peaceful environment. Ayurveda mentions various diets and medicines as general guidelines; however, these may not be acceptable or suitable for all *Garbhini*. This may be due to their individual preferences, aversions or pre-existing illnesses. In such situations, the dietary and medicinal choices have to be carefully selected emphasizing on *Hita* and *Satmya* substances, that are well tolerated and beneficial to the *Garbhini*. So, such dietary decisions during pregnancy should always be individualized and taken under the guidance of an Ayurvedic Physician.

### CONCLUSION

Ayurveda, adopts a preventive, long-term perspective on maternal mental health through *Masanumasika Garbhini Paricharya*, which describes detailed diet, medications and mindfulness during the phase where the *Ojas*, *Buddhi* and *Medha* are all in *Kshaya Avastha* (depleting state). Nutritional recommendations such as *Ksheera*, *Gritha*, *Snigdha*

*Mamsa Rasa*, *Madhura Ahara* and *Ksheerapakas*, function beyond nutrition, acting as *Mana Prasadana Aharas* - agents that pacify *Vata* and *Pitta*, enhance *Ojas*, and elevate *Satva Guna*. These measures nurture the *Majja Dhatu* and stabilize the mind, promoting calmness, emotional balance, and psychological resilience during pregnancy. Modern research further substantiates these classical insights, demonstrating their role in modulating the neurochemicals, reducing stress, and supporting the gut-brain axis. In the present era, where the prevalence of PPD and PPP are steadily rising, Ayurveda offers a structured and time-tested nutritional framework supporting maternal mental health and preventing the escalation to postpartum depressive disorders.

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