

Diet and regimen during pregnancy

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ABSTRACT

To rely on Ayurveda is the best way to ensure a safe and natural childbirth. Ayurveda understands all the factors, which bring about a hazard-free childbirth. By following a regulated diet and regimen, the pregnant mother is prepared for a natural delivery. By helping nature to take its course, women enjoy a risk-free childbirth. This paper provides a broad view of the diet and regimen during pregnancy

Throughout the period of pregnancy, Ayurveda advises the mother to follow a specific diet and regimen designed appropriately to take care of the requirement and needs of the pregnant woman. Generally the pregnant woman is advised to follow a diet, which is predominantly sweet in taste, easy to digest, cooling to the body and liquid in consistency. She is also recommended a month-wise diet regimen throughout the period of pregnancy. The rationale for such a diet is explained below.

The diet of a pregnant mother should satisfy four requirements:

1. Diet should nourish the mother during pregnancy
2. It should help the growth and development of the foetus
3. It should ensure a hazard-free and smooth child birth
4. It should help in the secretion of breast milk

Therefore, the food substances recommended for consumption during pregnancy possess qualities, which serve the above objectives. The food recommended during pregnancy is based on the month-wise requirement of the pregnant woman.

During the first three months of pregnancy, the focus is mainly on retaining the foetus. Therefore, a sweet, cooling and easy to digest diet is recommended to the mother. This type of food ensures that the foetus remains stable and there is no bleeding. Bleeding occurring during the first three months can lead to loss of the foetus. This diet ensures that there is no bleeding throughout the entire nine months of pregnancy.

The second phase of the pregnancy, i.e., from the fourth to the seventh month, is when the foetus gains maximum growth and development. The diet during this phase enables this.

During the last phase of pregnancy, the eighth and ninth month, the mother is prepared for undergoing a normal delivery, which is hazard-free and comfortable. The diet and regimen of the mother are designed to make this possible.

FOOD

The pregnant woman's diet is predominantly sweet in taste. Among the six tastes, sweet taste is ideal for a pregnant mother for various reasons. Substances, which are sweet in taste, are usually cooling to the body. Sweet taste helps in the building up and strengthening of all bodily tissues. It prevents emaciation and helps prolong life span. It increases stoutness, helps to unite bones, and improves strength and complexion. It is good for the sense organs, skin, hair and throat. Sweet taste gives a feeling of contentment. It is nourishing and gives stability to the body. It helps in the production of breast milk, mitigates burning sensation in the body and cures thirst and fainting. Sweet taste provides oiliness to the body. Sweet taste is ideal for children since it helps in growth. Substances with sweet taste control Vayu and Pitta. This taste is most important for children, the elderly, the emaciated and the wounded.

As sweet taste possesses all these qualities, it is considered the best for pregnant mothers. Some examples of food and herbs, which are sweet in taste are, milk, ghee, rice, wheat, raisins, dates, banana, jackfruit and sugarcane. Indian asparagus (*Satavari*) and *Vidari*, *Bala*, *yasti* and *gokshura* are some of the herbs, which are sweet in taste and rich in medicinal values.

As sweet taste is the one, which brings about nourishment and growth, it is included in the diet throughout pregnancy. Food which is usually cold in potency (cooling to the body), which is low in sour, salty and pungent tastes, and high in sweet taste ensures that the pregnant mother does not

have premature bleeding. It also protects her from anaemia.

On the contrary, food that is predominantly pungent (chilli hot), astringent and bitter in taste, can cause dryness in the body and obstruct the movement of faeces, urine and flatus. This type of food does not contribute to the nourishment of the mother, growth of the foetus or secretion of breast milk. It also does not help in the easy passage of the foetus during delivery. Foods, which are sour, salty, hot and pungent, make the mother anaemic.

Food and regimen recommended in Ayurveda for a pregnant mother ensures anemia-free pregnancy. Throughout pregnancy, the mother is advised to consume nourishing foods such as milk, ghee, butter, green gram, rice etc. Herbs, which are sweet in taste and cold in potency, are used during this period. In other words, she is advised to avoid food, which is pungent, sour, hot and spicy, which is one of the contributory factors for anemia. Intake of alcohol, day sleep and hard physical labour are forbidden throughout pregnancy. These are also among the causative factors for anemia.

FIRST MONTH

The diet of a pregnant mother should be mostly liquid in consistency. A liquid rice porridge is easy to digest, and helps in eliminating urine and feces. The most important diet recommended for the pregnant woman is milk.

Milk is the best food during pregnancy. Especially during the first month, milk should be consumed in adequate quantity. The pregnant mother should consume that quantity of milk, which she is able to digest without difficulty. It is very important to consume milk right through the nine months of pregnancy. Here let us look at the properties of milk.

MILK: Generally milk is sweet in taste. It is unctuous (it has oiliness). It promotes growth of tissues (Dhatu) and is cooling to the body. Cow's milk especially, improves intelligence, sustains life and acts as a rejuvenator. Milk cures fatigue, excessive thirst and hunger. It is an ideal food for persons suffering from emaciation. It helps in preventing bleeding. It increases strength and breast milk. For these reasons milk is the ideal food for pregnant mothers.

During the first month, milk should be consumed at room temperature. It need not be processed with any medicinal herbs. However, processing milk with the *Bala* (*Sida Cordifolia*) is useful. *Bala* is a commonly available herb with very good medicinal properties. *Bala* is cold in potency (or it is cooling to the body) and sweet in taste. It bestows strength and improves complexion. It is oily or unctuous in nature. Like milk *Bala* also has the property to prevent

bleeding. It is an excellent herb for regulating *Vayu* and for pacifying *Pitta*.

Sweet, cooling (in potency), liquid and wholesome diet twice during the day is the ideal food for a pregnant mother. The woman should consume food in moderate quantity. She should neither eat too much nor eat too little. During this month, rubbing or massaging the body with medicines, oils etc. should be avoided.

SECOND MONTH

During this month, milk is processed with medicinal herbs, which possess sweet taste and are cooling to the body. There are many drugs that can be recommended. Some of the commonly available drugs, usually prescribed are *Bala*, *Satavari*, *Yashti*, *Vidari* etc. These herbs are boiled along with water and milk till the water evaporates and given to the woman. Food during this month should be (preferably) liquid in consistency.

THIRD MONTH

Honey mixed with milk (at room temperature) and ghee is a drink recommended for pregnant mothers in the 3rd month. This kind of food helps the woman to fight nausea and vomiting which are the most obvious and common symptoms in the early part of pregnancy. Some women suffer from this a great deal. It usually troubles them from around the third month. The diet during this month helps them address this problem. Honey possesses the property of preventing vomiting. Rice porridge with milk is the recommended diet for this month.

Honey is a highly medicinal substance. It improves vision, relieves thirst and prevents bleeding (premature bleeding in case of pregnancy) as well as vomiting. Honey is also useful in case of cough, respiratory problems and diarrhea. It is important to note that wherever honey is used, it is to be added to the drink at room temperature.

There are many preparations, which can be included in the diet, especially for women who suffer from severe bouts of vomiting. For example:

- Paste of *Daniya* (*dhanyaka*) with rice-wash added with sugar is good for controlling vomiting during pregnancy.
- A drink made with the powder of popped paddy (*Laaja*) mixed with honey and sugar is very good for preventing nausea and vomiting.
- Pulp of *Bilva* fruit mixed with the water of popped paddy relieves vomiting during pregnancy.
- A soup made of green gram mixed with the seeds of pomegranate, salt and *ghee* relieves vomiting.

- A soup made of goat's meat, without salt, soured with pomegranate and mixed with spices that are appetizing, cures vomiting, especially vomiting caused by the aggravation of *Vayu*.
- Rice wash mixed with sugar, honey, powder of popped paddy, made tasty by adding spices such as cardamom, cinnamon and cloves, is especially effective in treating vomiting caused by the aggravation of *Pitta*.
- A decoction of tender leaves of mango and Jamun mixed with honey is good for vomiting caused by an aggravation of *Kapha* (phlegm).

During the first three months of pregnancy, extreme care is taken to prevent bleeding. From the fourth to the seventh month, the emphasis shifts to growth and development of the foetus.

FOURTH MONTH

By this month, all body parts are fully manifested. The food for this month includes butter extracted directly from milk. (This is called *Ksheera Navanitam* – *Ksheera* is milk and *Navanitam* is butter.) This butter should be taken along with milk. The quantity of butter can be about 12 grams.

Butter extracted from milk is best among oily, fatty substances for pregnant mothers. It is sweet in taste and very cold (cooling) in potency. It has the property of preventing bleeding during pregnancy. Butter improves strength, digestion and complexion. It helps cure cough, consumption, piles and disorders of *Vata*, *Pitta* and blood. It is very good for improving eyesight. During pregnancy it is an ideal food and it helps to create softness of body parts. Among the women of rural Tamilnadu, consuming butter with warm rice-water (the supernatant water while boiling rice) is a practice, which is widely prevalent even to this day.

In the fourth month, soup made from meat is a recommended diet. The meat should be free of fat. In general, use of meat soup during pregnancy is recommended in specific months and regular and continuous use is however discouraged. During pregnancy, food that is light (easy to digest) is preferred. Regular intake of meat can result in increase in the size of the foetus. The foetus should be neither too big nor too small. This can be achieved if the diet of the mother is managed carefully. Meat soup in the fourth month is aimed at improving the growth of the foetus.

Meat possesses many good properties. Meat in general, is the best food for controlling the *Vayu* in the body. Meat soup bestows stoutness, strength and nourishment to the body. It also gives contentment (*Preenanam*). It is good for improving vision and is an aphrodisiac. Meat in general, is heavy to digest. Properties of different meats differ slightly from one

another. Among the meats, which are commonly available in the market, soup of goat's meat is preferable. Goat's meat prepared as a fat-free soup is easy to digest. It does not aggravate any dosha in the body. It gives stoutness to the body.

FIFTH MONTH

- Ghee should be added to milk gruel and consumed
- Porridge with milk and rice
- Light and easy to digest meat soup

Like milk, ghee is a very important diet for women throughout pregnancy. Ghee is a substance with numerous medicinal qualities. There is no other substance that can be compared with ghee in its qualities. Ghee possesses a very special property, which is that it enhances intellect, memory and other mental faculties. Even though it is a fat, it improves the power of digestion, unlike other fats. Ghee increases life span and fertility. It also improves sight, voice and complexion. It is a good tonic for children and the elderly. It gives softness to the body. Ghee is also an ideal tonic for persons suffering from emaciation, injuries and wounds from weapons and fire. For disorders caused by *Vata* and *Pitta*, ghee is an ideal medicine. It is also used as a medicine in the treatment of poisons, insanity, and consumption and in certain kinds of fevers. Ghee is the best among all fatty substances. It is cooling to the body and the best tonic for retaining youthfulness. It is capable of giving thousands of beneficial effects if it is processed in different ways along with herbs. Ghee made from butter which is extracted from milk, is ideal for pregnant women as it also helps in preventing bleeding.

SIXTH MONTH

- Watery *kanji* (rice or wheat gruel) preparations
- *Gokshura*, processed in ghee and added to *Kanji* (gruel)
- Ghee (made from butter derived from milk) processed with sweet herbs

Gokshura is a commonly found small thorny herb and it is found all over India. These thorns have high medicinal value and are particularly useful during pregnancy. *Gokshura* is cooling and strengthening to the body. It is sweet in taste and helps in improving digestion. One very important property of *Gokshura* is that it is an excellent herb in all problems related to the urinary system. It cleanses the urinary bladder, removes urinary stones, controls diabetes and relieves difficulty in urination. It is nourishing to the body and is an aphrodisiac. It is useful in treating respiratory problems, cough, piles and heart disease. It is useful in controlling aggravated *Vayu* in the body. A handful of *Gokshura* can be added to two glasses of water and boiled down to a quarter glass. This decoction is strained and added to the *Kanji*. Ghee (prepared from butter

extracted from milk) is added to this gruel and the pregnant woman can adopt this simple diet during this month. This gruel can be consumed twice daily if possible. By this, the flow of urine becomes free and unobstructed. This also prevents swelling in the feet of the pregnant mother. This diet is cooling, nourishing and strengthening for the mother. It helps in regulating *Vayu* during pregnancy. Diet during the sixth month also includes ghee processed with sweet herbs.

SEVENTH MONTH

By now all parts of the foetus are fully developed and the foetus is nourished well. The regimen for the seventh month is the same as that of the sixth. Herb, which is specially recommended for this month, is *Vidari*. Ghee processed with *Vidari* is a valuable supplement in this month. *Vidari* abounds in medicinal properties ideal for pregnant mothers.

Vidari is sweet in taste and cold in potency. It is oily, stoutening and strengthening to the body. It is diuretic in action. For secreting breast milk *Vidari* is an ideal herb. It improves voice, complexion and prolongs life. *Vidari* is rejuvenator and improves fertility. It controls burning sensation, reduces aggravated *vata* and *pitta* and is good for blood disorders. Dried pieces of *Vidari* are available in the market, which can be used for medicinal purposes.

During the seventh month, a pregnant woman may experience certain discomfort. She may experience itching or burning sensation in the body. Many mistake this condition to be some allergic reaction or result of some insect bites. Due to the pressure of the growing foetus, the three *doshas vata, pitta* and *kapha* get pushed up the chest causing itching and burning of the body. During this time the woman should refrain from scratching and damaging the skin. If the itching is very severe, kneading and massaging with mild friction may be done. The chest and abdomen and wherever she experiences itching, paste of sandal wood or sandalwood paste along with *usheera* (*khas* in Hindi and *vettiver* in Tamil) can be applied over her chest, abdomen and thighs for relief. She should consume food in small quantity, avoiding salt and oil or add salt and oil in small quantities. She should also drink water in small quantities after consuming food. Food should be sweet in taste, easy to digest and that which pacifies *vata*.

EIGHTH & NINTH MONTH

The main thrust of the prescribed diet and regimen of these two months is to prepare the mother towards the forthcoming delivery. During the eighth month the ideal food for the pregnant woman is thin gruel mixed with milk and ghee. This helps the woman to keep good health while also nourishing the foetus. During the ninth month, food mixed with ghee and meat soup or thick gruel mixed with large quantities of fat is

ideal for the woman. This gives her the health and strength to withstand the delivery.

From the ninth month onwards, the pregnant woman should always apply oil on the body and never remain without it. Cotton soaked in oil is placed in the vaginal area to make the birth canal oily, soft and flexible. This practice of placing cotton soaked in oil in the vagina was very much in vogue in the villages of Tamilnadu until recently. Women were actively discouraged from following this practice by modern medical practitioners on the ground that it leads to infection!

During the ninth month, a medicated oil enema is administered to the pregnant woman. By this, fecal matter is eliminated and this also prepares the woman towards childbirth. By the use of oil tampon and oil enema and constant application of oil on the body, the birth canal and perineum become soft and stretched paper thin during birth without tearing.

After delivery too the mother is recommended a diet and regimen. Her body is massaged with oil, sprinkled with hot water and her stomach is tied with a cloth. This prevents air (*vayu*) from occupying the space left behind by the foetus. She is given medicines immediately after this, which helps to expel the dirt and clean the uterus. Initially for a week she is maintained on a light diet. She is administered *lehyams* and *arishtams* to improve health and secretion of milk. After a week or ten days a large variety of food is introduced in her diet. All this helps the mother to recover quickly her lost strength and vitality.

To understand and value the strengths of the Ayurveda, the modern mind has to unlearn some of the biases that inhibit the total acceptance of the efficacy and safety of the traditional system. Also it is time to review the role of Ayurveda in public health care facilities in all MCH programs and policies. Such a policy reform will reshape the future of health care in India.

Botanical names for Herbs mentioned:

<i>Bala</i>	–	<i>Sida cordifolia</i>
<i>Bilva</i>	–	<i>Aegle marmelos</i>
<i>Dhanyaka</i>	–	<i>Coriandrum sativum</i>
<i>Gokshura</i>	–	<i>Tribulus terrestris</i>
<i>Laaja</i>	–	Puffed rice
<i>Sariba</i>	–	<i>Hemidesmus indicus</i>
<i>Shatavari</i>	–	<i>Asparagus racemosus</i>
<i>Usheera</i>	–	<i>Vetiveria zizanioides</i>
<i>Vidari</i>	–	<i>Ipomoea digitata</i>
<i>Yashti</i>	–	<i>Glycyrrhiza glabra</i>

References:

1. Charaka Samhita (Saarira Sthanam)
2. Ashtanga Hridayam (Saarira Sthanam)