

PCOS, Female Reproductive Health and Ayurveda Patricia Wickman

"Yo pa ka achte moso manman nan mache."
Mothers are irreplaceable.
--Haitian proverb

I had forgotten...A well
hidden amongst flowers
and willows,
jealously guarded.
A well o freshness and thirst
that exults and swells with rain,
pulling toward itself
from each bank
vital forces which
burst into life...
--Bernard Haillant
extract from the song *Ma province*

Arwen's happy story is evidence that Ayurveda offers hope to individuals who have female reproductive imbalance. It is a joy for practitioners like myself to see people make the leap of faith to add and subtract elements to their daily schedule based on ancient wisdom that seems vastly different from Western medicine. Ayurveda literally means the science of life. It is a complete medical system that has evolved over 5,000 years and has its roots in Ancient India. The devoted student of Ayurveda learns that it is a profound art and science that inspires one to view health, vitality and longevity as a proactive and creative work in progress similar to a garden. In this article, I will give a shallow introduction to the Ayurvedic perspective on PCOS and then write briefly on the broader subject of female reproductive health. In doing this, I wish to inspire all women who read this article to experiment with Ayurveda. Just as nurturing a plant yields delicious food, so too, does self-TLC produce a woman whose health, beauty and vitality originate from deep within her cells and radiate out like petals of a sunflower.

Ayurvedic treatment of Polycystic Ovarian Syndrome (PCOS) is specific to the individual. The Ayurvedic practitioner does a thorough assessment of the client and determines her Ayurvedic constitution based on the three doshas: Vata, Pitta and Kapha. Through questioning, observation, tongue observation and pulse diagnosis, the practitioner and the client jointly determine the nature and degree of imbalance. In the majority of women with PCOS, there is a strong Kapha component: they often

struggle with mysterious weight gain that is hard to lose even while maintaining a light diet, healthy lifestyle and regular exercise. Some women with PCOS appear to be of a Kapha nature: large bone structure, plentiful tissues, calm disposition, etc. Upon questioning, observation and pulse taking I have found that some are Pitta-Vata (or Vata-Pitta), but are simply carrying extra weight. A few of the women I have seen with PCOS have said that their large bodies do not feel native to them—they feel as if they are going around in a suit that does not belong to them. Other women with PCOS are not overweight, but simply have irregular menstrual cycles. One of the phenomena of this disorder is that the eggs in the ovaries prepare to leave the ovaries, but the necessary hormones that cause the final leap out of the ovaries are lacking. The egg in this instance is like a seed that is ready to burst out of the ground, but then does not succeed because the sprouting conditions are not available. Reference the following website to learn more about PCOS from an Ayurvedic perspective:

<http://www.atreya.com/ayurveda/spip.php?article104>

After the initial consultation, the Ayurvedic practitioner designs a program for you that includes dietary recommendations, lifestyle modification, herbal supplementation, yoga, breathing, meditation, cleansing procedures and hands-on body therapies. There is no one-size-fits-all in Ayurveda. It is best to see a practitioner who will recommend a program that takes into account your constitution, your current state of health, your schedule, your family situation, and causative factors that are individual to you. For example, one woman may have a high level of ama (toxicity) that is causing imbalance in the female reproductive system. For another woman it may be that her digestion, metabolism, absorption or elimination is impaired. For another, it could be high levels of stress, lack of sleep, an unhealthy relationship, a poor diet or a genetic predisposition. Ayurvedic treatment protocols help people pluck out imbalance at its root and create a fertile field with life-promoting conditions.

For female reproductive health in general, Ayurveda calls for a woman to remember her place in nature and her female ancestral heritage that was passed down to her from her mother's womb. In ancient cultures, women's menstrual cycles were linked to the 28-day moon period. Women menstruated together on the new moon and retreated from the village in tents where they could take a break from nurturing others and spend time resting and relaxing. The modern woman is so busy that she does not take time to stop during her period. The manic pace at which

we live our lives contributes to women's woes such as PMS, PCOS, acne, heavy bleeding, spotting in between periods, endometriosis, fibroids, unsavory menopausal symptoms, infertility, etc. During my training in Ayurveda, one of my classmates shared an experience of being on a surgery rotation during medical school. She started her period in the middle of a surgical procedure and was so compelled to keep up with the other doctors that she bled all over the floor during the surgery.

What are we women of the post-feminist world to do? We are bright, successful, educated and capable of both professional and domestic excellence, yet our ancient bodies seem to be calling us back to the moon hut. What good is accomplishment if we destroy our health, shorten our lives and lose our happiness in the process? I propose that we take small steps toward listening to the call of nature and revolt against the market driven, competitive, frantic culture in which we live. In Maya Tawari's book *The Path of Practice*, she explains that connecting with *shakti* energy is fundamental to women's physical and spiritual health:

According to Vedic seers, a woman's femininity cannot exist apart from her *shakti*—the one energy that gave birth to everything. *Shakti* is the Mother's power behind creation, and signifies the sacred mysteries of creation, regeneration, and destruction...The Divine Mother endowed all females with two gifts: the power to nurture and the power to protect. *Shakti* is more than the energy of reproduction. It is the spirit of protecting the sacred, gathering food, worshiping the Divine and giving birth to children, to inspiration, to ideas and art (Tiwari 54 55).

There are an infinite number of ways to honor *shakti*. Lie low during your two or three days of heavy bleeding, perform daily warm oil self-massage, oil your hair, receive shirodhara (an Ayurvedic body therapy where warm oil is poured in a continuous stream over the third eye), keep a moon calendar by your bedside and perform the moon salutation on the full moon, practice the goddess pose (supta baddha konasana), do the yoni mudra, drink a quarter cup of aloe vera juice everyday (aloe vera is fantastic for balancing women's hormones), take moments to squat. Squatting connects a woman to the earth. Have an Ayurvedic practitioner guide you through a women's cleansing program. Become a master of pelvic floor exercises, paint your toenails, get a henna tattoo, pick up a silk scarf, turn on some sultry music and let your hips and pelvis dance, prepare a lovely meal of farm-fresh food for you and your family, rock a baby to sleep, spend time in nature, cultivate deep and lasting friendships with other women, repair any hurt in your relationship with your mother and/or mother-in-law. Create something. Teach all of

this to your daughters. As you nurture *shakti*, may your reproductive balance be well established, your eyes sparkle, your skin shine and your garden of health be plentiful and fruitful!