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Role of Yoga in gastro-intestinal problems w.s.r. to Constipation (*Vibandha*) in geriatrics

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ABSTRACT

Jararoga can be incorporated in geriatrics in modern parlance which is a branch of medicine concerned especially with problems of ageing and diseases of elderly people. It tends to vary in different age groups by genetic factors, dietary habits, socio-economically conditions, life style, occurrence of diseases etc. Ayurveda has considered aged or elderly as *Jara* or *Vardhakya*, a natural disease. During this period of life, due to *Dhatukshaya*, *Vatavridhi* etc., *Vatika* disorders related to Gastro-intestinal tract like indigestion, abdominal distention, flatulence, diarrhoea, joint pain, backache, tremors in limbs, Insomnia are common problems. Among these constipation (*Vibandha*) is commonly complained by every second elder person. So, to treat this problem completely various Yogic procedures which are economically almost free can be a good alternative to treat constipation holistically. Management of geriatric G.I.T. problems especially constipation by Yoga can be done in two ways, by *Yogic Ahara* and by *Yogic Vihara* as Acharya Charaka says "*Ahara Sambhavam Vastu Roga Aahar Sambhava*". *Yogic Vihara* means by various *Yogic Kriyas* and *Asanas* like *Surya-namaskar*, *Vajrasana*, *Pashchimothasana*, *Dhanurasana*, *Pranayama*, *Pratyahara* and various *Agnisara Kriyas* through one can get control over *Apana Vayu* by correcting *Jatharagni* successfully.

Key words: Constipation, Geriatrics disorders, *Yogic Ahara*, *Vihara*.

INTRODUCTION

India is undergoing major demographic changes. As birth rates decline, we witness an increase in the geriatric population. At 80 million, we are home to the second largest geriatric population in the world. By the year 2020, it is expected that this number would double to a staggering 160 million accounting for 13 percent of the entire population.^[1] In the medical

world, it is common to mention the four 'I's as the geriatric giants - Instability, Immobility, Incontinence and Impaired Intellect. However, this list is not exhaustive. There are a few problems which are more frequently encountered in this age group. Successful aging can have many different meanings. Freedom from illness and disease is a wishful thought as the life span progresses over many decades after the fifth decade of life.

The aging process includes maturity in thinking, planning, acting and evaluating the outcomes of decision. It tends to vary in different age groups by genetic factors, dietary habits, socioeconomically conditions, life style and occurrence of diseases etc. It also means the aging of the human body. Some of the change that occur with aging included declining function of some organs and body systems, which can produce illness and disease processes, while aging does not have to mean experiencing ill health, the changes in physiology associated with aging are often associated with illness and disease, given patterns of

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decline may be in structure or function, whether from aging or disease or both. The decline may not be noticed until it reaches a level that is beyond the individual's ability to adapt. Successful aging includes successful adaptation to changes. Ayurveda has considered aged or elderly as *Jara* or *Vardhakya*, a natural disease.^[2]

Geriatrics disorders

Acharya Sharangadhara says; in old age physiologically *Dhatukshaya* occurs and due to dominant *Vata Vardhak Ahara-Vihara*, *Apana Vayu* gets vitiated, the sub-type of *Vata* that supports elimination and stability of *Mala*. Due to *Vata Dosha Vriddhi*; *Vatika* disorders like indigestion, abdominal distention, flatulence, frequently constipation and diarrhoea, joint pain, of gastro-esophageal reflux disease or GERD, backache, tremors in limbs, insomnia, dementia, loss of memory etc. found much more in this stage of life in compare to other period of life.^[3]

Current Scenario

Among these disorders, G.I.T. disorders are much important as, the functioning of the Gastro intestinal system has wide-ranging influences on the body. GI complaints are even more likely to be the chief complaint, rather than just an associated problem. Many G.I. tract disorders begin with a loss of appetite and nausea with or without vomiting. Continued nausea usually results in loss of appetite and potential weight loss. More complicated G.I. conditions of older adults account for great personal expenditure for treatment and a drain on the Nation's economy.^[4] There is increased evidence of several impaired gastrointestinal functions with aging. The changes in intestinal microflora and reduced intestinal immunity of aged may favour gastrointestinal infections that are frequent in the elderly.^[5]

Every year approximately 62 million Americans are diagnosed with G.I. tract disorders. According to the National Institute of health, digestive cost nearly 107 billion dollar in direct health care expenditures.

Why constipation?

Constipation is a common complaint in any population. About 20% of people in USA suffer from

constipation.^[6] One population based study from India in only 505 people found the prevalence of constipation by the Rome II criteria to be 16.8% and self-reported constipation to be 24.8% in the last 1 year,^[7] but the true prevalence of constipation in the larger Indian population is not known due to lack of a uniform definition of constipation. The term constipation is basically a patient's perception variously describing subjective feeling of inability to pass faeces smoothly or regularly, hard stool or obstruction to its passage, unproductive urges or feeling of incomplete evacuation and hence it is difficult to define. The situation in Asia is different. In several Asian countries the normal stool frequency is 1-2 motions/day in over 90% of population.^{[8],[9],[10],[11]} Although constipation is often looked upon as a common problem, if not treated or if treatment is delayed, it can lead to further problems such as hemorrhoids, anal fissures, rectal prolapse, fecal incontinence, bloody stools, fistula.

Constipation

Constipation refers to the incomplete evacuation or difficulty in passing of stools or passing of hard stools. In simple language it is irregular and infrequent or difficult evacuation of the bowels. It is the most common digestive complaint yet, it is treated as a symptom and not a disease by itself. Constipation occurs among all ages, from newborns to elderly persons. However, this condition is more common among the elderly.

In Ayurveda, it is referred to as *Anaha*, *Koshta Baddhata* or *Vibandha*. It is usually a *Vata* disorder, particularly if it is a long-standing condition or in the elderly. It may also be due to *Tikshna* and *Ushna Gunas* of *Pitta* or *Guru*, *Picchila Guna* of *Kapha*. Proper assimilation of food and elimination of faeces are important for maintaining health. Improper elimination from the colon causes retention of waste and morbid matter, which results in systemic poisoning or autointoxication. When the colon does not function promptly, the result is an accumulation of offensive and highly poisonous wastes; Ayurveda calls it "*Ama*". *Ama* is considered as root cause of

most of the ailments as per Ayurveda. The normal duration between the times the food is eaten until the faeces is expelled, is normally between 16 to 24 hours. If the residue remains for more than 24 hrs, it gives rise to *Ama*.

Causes for constipation

Constitution of the individual (Prakriti) especially *Vata* type of *Prakriti* (constitution) are more prone to constipation

- **Diet:** The most common cause of constipation is an improper eating habits including eating a lot of food, foods that are heavy and difficult to digest as well as ingestion of *Vata* promoting food which is dry (*Ruksha*), powdery (*Pishta*), cold (*Shita*), astringent (*Kashaya*), bitter (*Tikta*), quickly digestive and residue-free diet. For example, cheese, eggs, and meats, refined flour and food having such qualities lead to indigestion.
- **Not enough liquids:** Liquids like water and juice add fluid to the colon and bulk to stools, making bowel movements softer and easier to pass. Other liquids, like coffee and soft drinks that contain caffeine seem to have a dehydrating effect.
- **Lack of exercise:** Lack of exercise can also lead to constipation. For example, constipation often occurs after an accident or during an illness when one must stay in bed and cannot exercise.
- **Medications:** Excessive use of *Shita*, *Ruksha Guna* dominant compound or single *Dravya* like *Balchaturbhadra Churna*, *Panchavalkal Kwath*, *Nagakesar* etc.
- **Changes in life or routine:** During pregnancy, women may be constipated because of hormonal changes or because the heavy uterus compresses the intestine. In addition, people often become constipated when traveling because their normal diet and daily routines are disrupted.
- **Abuse of laxatives:** Laxatives usually are not necessary and can be habit-forming.
- **Habit of suppressing the urge over long periods (Vega Dharana):** People who ignore the urge to

have a bowel movement may eventually stop feeling the urge, which can lead to constipation. Some people delay having a bowel movement because they do not want to use toilets outside the home. Others ignore the urge because of emotional stress or because they are too busy. Irregular sleeping habits or emotional disturbances (stress, grief, fear or worry) are other causes for the constipation.

- **Specific diseases:** Diseases that cause constipation include *Ajirna*, *Vatavyadhi*, *Adhmana*, *Atopa*, *Arsha*, *Bhagandara*, scanty food or starvation (*Anashana*), plenty of exercising (*Ati Vyayama*), intestinal obstruction (*Antra Avarodha*) by foreign body or due to intussusceptions (*Sammurchhana*), Worms (*Krumi*), impacted feces etc.

Search for an alternative therapy for Geriatric problems

Therapeutic modalities used in younger age groups are also applicable to the geriatric population, but great attention needs to be given to side effects and drug interactions. There are so many alternative therapies for curing these disorders but in old age due to *Ojaskshaya* and *Balahrasa* body can't tolerate very potent drugs which are useful in young patients for G.I. problems.

DISCUSSION

'Yoga' the word itself means union, i.e. union of body and mind for a healthy living. There is no organ in the body that *Yoga* exercises do not address. *Yoga* aims at working towards bringing a balance in mind and body of a person, *Yoga* exercises can give relief virtually from any ailment, relating to any organ of the body. So, Management of such geriatric G.I.T. problems by *Yoga* can be done in two ways,

1. Yogic *Vihara* and
2. Yogic *Ahara*.

In Yogic *Vihara*, various Yogic procedures like *Suryanamaskara*, *Yoga Mudras* and *Asanas* specifically *Vajrasana*, *Pavanamuktasana*, *Virasana*, *Matsyasana*, *Pashchimottanasana*, *Bhujangasana*,

Dhanurasana, *Naukasana* etc. which are not so heavy to do for elder ones are adopted here. There is a very old saying in India, that if the brain and belly are healthy then a man is wealthy; meaning, when the mind is at peace and there is nothing ailing the stomach, then that person is fit and calm. The two in fact are connected hence to have a peaceful mind it is absolutely essential that our digestive system remains strong and all these *Asanas* are perfect cure for gas and constipation, two niggling problems of the stomach.

In the *Yoga Sutras*, Patanjali suggests that *Asana* is "to be seated in a position that is firm, but relaxed". At the physical level *Asanas*, *Kriyas*, *Mudras* and *Pranayama* stabilize and balance the energies of the adults and thus contribute to a proper usage of his energy. They tone up the digestive system by the alternate stretching and compression of abdominal organs. It activates digestion and gets rid of various G.I problems and also, Strengthens abdominal muscles by putting entire weight on stomach, thus toning stomach muscles and making stronger as well as to digest food better and cleanse system of leftover food. They thoroughly ventilates the lungs and oxygenates the blood, acts as detoxifying agent, by getting rid of enormous of carbon dioxide and other toxic gases.

Surya Namaskara, or the Sun Salutation, is a form of worshipping *Surya*, the Hindu solar deity by concentrating on the Sun, for vitalization. The physical aspect of the practice 'links together'. This applies even to gastrointestinal problems faced by us regularly. *Yoga* for digestive system has a set of exercises or positions, '*Asanas*' and various *Yogic Mudras*, *Suryanamaskara* etc. that can provide complete relief from G.I. problems. *Yoga* and *Ayurveda* in combination cannot just give relief but also provide with perfect medication and complete cure from several stomach and digestive order related ailments. *Yoga* therapy prescribes several *Asanas* that might affect digestion problems, these range to deep breathing exercises to increase oxygen in blood as well as bring breathing in sync with the metabolic system (*Pranayama*) as well as several *Asanas* that

address stomach problems directly like the '*Dhanurasana*' which makes you put entire weight on your stomach, thus toning stomach muscles and making these stronger as well as to digest food better and cleanse system of leftover food, etc. for beginners there are *Asanas* like the *Ardha Dhanurasana* half of the *Dhanurasana* where you require to lift only the upper torso to rest its weight on stomach.

Yoga exercises are not like allopathic medicines which generally provide short term but instantaneous relief, these exercises will take a week to become completely effective. According to *Shrimad Bhagvad Gita*,^[12] *Yoga* combined happy life is described as; *Yogic Ahara* (food, air and water taken for the sustenance of the body), *Vihara* (the contact with nature needed by the body) *Cheshta* (the efforts performed by the man with a *Sankalpa* (determination), *Karma* (skillfully performed actions), *Swapna* (sleep and rest etc) to awaken (to be in the conscious state). The combination of these can destroy all the sufferings of life. In *Ayurveda*, *Maharshi Charaka* supports it^[13] and says people who are desirous of a healthy and happy life should bring about a discipline and order in the above aspects of their life. E.g. the food should be pure, easily digestible and inclusive of good *Samskaras*. The items produced by nature in different seasons are considered to be the most worthy food of the respective seasons. Therefore consumption of seasonal foods is very helpful for maintaining good health. The meaning of *Vihara* is behaving in accordance with nature. In nature every season and place has its effect and there are principles to be followed to take advantage of the place and the season. Understanding these principles and behaving accordingly would be advantageous to health. If our efforts and actions are directed towards noble objectives and are implemented in the right time with the right means, then they prove to be beneficial otherwise in spite of being active and performing exercise one does not incur any benefits. People desirous of leading healthy and happy life should also be taking care of their *Ahara*.^[14]

Without proper diet one can't get the benefits of *Yogic Kriyas* and also may suffer from various diseases. So, *Yogic Ahara* is as important as *Yogic Kriyas* in the management of diseases and to maintain the healthy life. Numerous gastrointestinal complaints, from vague, indigestion to specific diseases as diverticulitis or peptic ulcer sometimes effectively reduce food intake and curtail the needed nutrients. A variety of other diseases limit food intake or utilization. Limited absorption of nutrients curtails nourishment still further. Numerous psychological and social factors are associated with nutrition intake and health status. It is established that dietary intake lowers with the age due to poor appetite, health status, eating alone and gastrointestinal problems which result into weight loss and malnutrition.^[15]

Economically all these Yogic procedures are almost free of cost and one can get benefit of these procedures in anytime and anywhere.

CONCLUSION

Yogic Ahara and *Vihara* can be a good alternative for all geriatric disorders like chronic gastro-intestinal problems especially constipation. By modifying *Ahara* and *Vihara* one can stop to continue the pathophysiology of constipation which manifests by *Agnimandya*. To ignite the *Jatharagni* ultimately one should take the *Laghu*, *Ushna* etc. *Ahara* in low quantity and follow specific *Vihara* through adopting specific *Asanas* and *Mudras* working over digestive system like *Vajrasana*, *Pavanmuktasana* etc. which can correct the digestive fire and get rid of constipation.

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