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Practical utility of *Phalaprashana Samskara* (introduction of fruits) to the infant after a period of exclusive breast feeding

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ABSTRACT

Health of a child especially in infantile period is a major concern and subject matter of fretfulness for parents as well as for whole family. This period accompanies with lots of doubts and hesitations about baby's health, making parents uncertain for deciding what is best for their baby. Nutrition remains their main concern about what to give? what is ideal period? what is ideal sequence of fruits and food article etc. Focusing on above described area, attempts are made to investigate beneficiary effect of introduction of fruits in weaning period on infantile health. Introduction of fruits to the baby is known as *Phalaprashana* in Ayurvedic terminology. Similar to Pediatric branch of modern medicine, *Kaumarbhritya* is an important division of Ayurveda science dealing with child care and treatment of childhood diseases. Here view of Ayurveda is explored about introduction of fruits to the infant after period of exclusive breastfeeding, before starting any solid food items.

Key words: Ayurveda, Kaumarbhritya, Phalaprashana, Fruits, Nutrition, Weaning.

INTRODUCTION

Ayurveda is a holistic science with the aim to protect health of human being and treatment of disease when status of health is impaired.^[1] Here each and every aspects of human life is elucidated scientifically. Similar to different branches and specialties of modern medicine, Ayurveda is also divided into main eight branches like *Kayachikitsa* (General medicine), *Kaumarbhritya* (Ayurvedic paediatric), *Shalakyata Tantra / Urdhwanga* (ENT, Eye and Dental), *Jara* (Geriatrics) etc.^[2] To have a look about concept of

child's growth and development from Ayurveda perspective, there are different *Samhitas* (Ayurvedic classics) with relative description about childhood growth and development. Among them *Kashyapa Samhita* (or *Vridhdha Jivakiya Tantra*) is the main and solitary text with major focus on *Kaumarbhritya* subject - a branch dealing with care of child from newborn to childhood period and treatment of diseases occurring in this age group. Though this existing *Samhita* is incomplete and in deficient form due to its history about gone astray and resurrection, there are many valuable concepts and opinions of *Acharya Kashyapa* enfolded in it, are still practically useful in paediatric practice in this scientific era. One of such concept is *Phalaprashana* (introduction of fruit to infant) is elaborated with its practical utility along with updated scientific research and facts of modern science.

CONCEPT OF PHALAPRASHANA SAMSKARA

Similar to growth and development of child in recent paediatric, there are different *Samskaras* (rituals / sacraments) practiced during childhood period at particular developmental stage in ancient era,

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projecting probable relation with growth and development of child. Description of *Samskaras* is mentioned in different Ayurvedic classics as well as historic literatures. Though variation is found in the views regarding total number and the time of performing each *Samskara*. In nutshell these are socially weaved practices performing during infantile and childhood period; some of those are vanished and some are still in current practice. There are sixteen main *Samskaras* mentioned in a book written by Swami Dayanand Saraswati.^[3] Eight *Samskaras* of these sixteen (*Jatakarma, Namakarana, Nishkramana, Annaprashana, Chudakarma, Karnavedhana, Upanayana* and *Vedarambha*) are related to paediatric age group as per Ayurvedic concept of age classification and thus covered in the subject of *Kaumarbhritya*.

Acharya Kashyapa - author of *Kashyapa Samhita* was the first scholar who instigated one distinctive *Samskara* namely *Phalaprashana* in addition to these eight *Samskaras* stated above.^[4] *Phalaprashana* is the formal procedure of introducing fruits to an infant before introduction of any dietary preparation (*Annaprashana*). It is subsequent to *Upaveshana Samskara* (rituals performed when an infant is prepared to seat for the first time) which is performed during sixth month.^[5] *Annaprashana* is the ceremony or ritual performed on first introduction of food preparation to the baby, which is described by almost all *Acharyas* at 6th month age or after eruption of teeth.^[6,7,8,9] Thus views of different *Acharyas* about the time of introduction of complimentary food after a period of 6 month of exclusive breastfeeding is very clear. In addition to this, *Acharya Kashyapa* opines his view on introduction of fruit earlier and food afterwards on either eruption of teeth or at the age of 10 months.^[10]

There is no any other reference about concept or detail about *Phalaprashana* as per available knowledge and understanding of author. Thus it is characteristic attribute of *Acharya Kashyapa* described in *Kashyapa Samhita*. This study was initiated to explore the exceptional thinking and coherent value behind this concept.

INFANTILE NUTRITION AT A GLANCE

Nutrition is well acknowledged factor essentially associated with growth and development of human being. Adequate nutrition during infancy and early childhood is fundamental requirement for the development of every child at his best potential.

Childhood age especially infantile period is more susceptible period for risk of malnutrition and its related consequences due to higher requirement of nutrition of their body to cope up the need of growth and development. It is accepted that the period from birth to two years of age is a "critical window" for the promotion of optimal growth, health and behavioral development.^[11] Number of researches and studies in area of infantile and childhood morbidity as well as mortality shows that this is the peak age for growth issues. This includes deficiencies of protein or/and energy and certain micronutrients; and common childhood illnesses such as diarrhea and other infectious diseases. After a child reaches two years of age, it is very difficult to reverse the stunting that has occurred earlier.^[12]

World Health Organization (WHO) and UNICEF (The United Nations Children's Fund) recommend breastfeeding for a period of minimum 1 year with emphasis on feeding until 2 years with exclusive breastfeeding for the first 6 months of life.^[13] During this period infant after 6month of age will require complementary foods i.e. food given in addition to breast feeding. After six months of age, it becomes increasingly difficult for breastfed infants to meet their nutrient needs from human milk alone.^[14] Furthermore, most infants are developmentally ready for other foods at about six months.^[15] Thus, the consensus is that six months is the appropriate age at which to introduce complementary foods.^[16] The transition from exclusive breastfeeding to family foods, referred to as complementary feeding, typically covers the period from 6 to 18-24 months of age.^[17]

FRUITS FACTS AND INFANT DIGESTIVE HEALTH

Fruits are the first choice to introduce after breast milk due to better consistency and well tolerated

similar to breast milk.^[18] Here some of the benefits of fruits are described.^[19]

1. In addition to better taste fruits require little digestion for adequate absorption and utilization.
2. Abundance of vitamins and minerals
3. Excellent source of energy
4. Rich in natural carbohydrates
5. High water content
6. Similar protein content to breast milk

It is better to begin with juicier fruits like melon and firstly in juice form. If tolerated then start with fruit mash and puree. After better adaptation it is appropriate to use entire fruit. When it comes to choose option for complementary food to introduce, sequential order should be followed as fruit, vegetables, grains and lastly proteins.

WHY IS FRUIT FIRST APPROPRIATE TO AGE OF 6-8 MONTH?

1. Infant have no teeth for the mastication and insufficient salivary secretions necessary for starch breakdown which is required for the first stage of digestion.
2. The salivary secretions responsible for initiating starch breakdown are not present in significant concentrations until around the time the first teeth appear (commonly five to six months of age).^[20]
3. The infant digestive system is significantly different from a miniature version of the adult digestive system. For example, specific enzymes, such as human GL (Gastric lipase) that are highly relevant for lipid digestion during infancy, are not yet readily available.^[21]

Too early implementation of food other than breast milk as well as wrong sequence of complementary food article will lead to negative ramification on overall health. There are some remarkable findings by researchers about connection between early introduction of solid or complimentary food and some disease entities.

According to one research Introducing solids too early could increase the child's risk of obesity, diabetes and coeliac disease.^[22] In another cohort study it was found that later formula introduction was associated with lower odds of food allergy in children without eczema. There were similar trends for delayed introduction (>6 months) of rice/wheat cereal and other solid foods. In addition to that later introduction of both formula as well as solid foods seemed to have some protective effect in children without eczema.^[23]

CONCLUSION

Medical science is the science where innovation and new updates are time-honored and aimed to give maximum benefit to the society. Ayurveda the ancient health science is aimed to health promotion and cure of disease of civilization. As said earlier about one branch of Ayurveda named *Kaumarbhritya*, it covers all the concerns and care about child which is nowadays comes under the theme of Neonatology to Paediatric. *Phalaprashana* is one of the practice, was being performed at that time. Efforts are made to make further precision about *Phalaprashana Samskara*. This ancient contemplation is supported with positive research conclusions and therefore confirms its scientific consideration.

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