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Virechana Karma in Ayurveda: A classical and contemporary review

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Abstract

Background: Ayurveda, the ancient Indian system of medicine, emphasizes the balance of Doshas as the foundation of health. Panchakarma, the fivefold purification therapy, is a unique Ayurvedic approach designed to eliminate accumulated toxins and restore homeostasis. Among these procedures, Virechana Karma (therapeutic purgation) is considered the most effective method for the elimination of aggravated Pitta Dosha and its associated morbidities.

Objective: The aim of this review is to present a detailed account of the principles, indications, classical descriptions, and contemporary clinical relevance of Virechana Karma.

Methods: Classical Ayurvedic literature was reviewed alongside modern clinical studies and scientific discussions on the role of Virechana. The therapeutic scope, mechanisms, and outcomes of this procedure have been highlighted.

Results: Virechana is described as a safe and effective purification therapy that provides systemic detoxification and improves metabolic efficiency. It has been traditionally indicated in disorders such as Kushta (skin diseases), Kamala (jaundice), Prameha (diabetes), Arsha (piles), Amavata (rheumatoid arthritis), and neurological conditions like migraine. Modern clinical observations show improvements in metabolic regulation, reduction in inflammatory markers, and better quality of life after undergoing Virechana. Compared to other Panchakarma procedures, it is associated with minimal stress, wider applicability, and sustained therapeutic effects.

Conclusion: Virechana Karma is a cornerstone of Panchakarma therapy with both preventive and curative potential. It offers holistic detoxification, enhances digestion and metabolism, and serves as an effective intervention for a variety of chronic, metabolic, autoimmune, and dermatological conditions. Its relevance in the management of modern lifestyle disorders highlights the need for further clinical validation and integration into contemporary healthcare systems.

Keywords: Ayurveda, Panchakarma, Virechana, Pitta Dosha, detoxification, purification therapy

Introduction

वमनं विरेचनं चैव नस्यं निरूहमथानुवासनं च ।

रक्तमोक्षणमित्याहुः पंचकर्माणि तु पञ्चकृत्यम् ॥*Charaka Samhita (Sutra Sthana 16/20-21)*

Ayurveda, the ancient system of Indian medicine, emphasizes both prevention and cure through a holistic approach involving diet, lifestyle, and therapeutic interventions. Among the various therapeutic procedures, Panchakarma occupies a central position as it is the most comprehensive bio-cleansing regimen described in classical texts. Panchakarma includes five principal measures—Vamana (emesis), Virechana (purgation), Basti (enema), Nasya (nasal therapy), and Raktamokshana (bloodletting)—designed for systemic purification of vitiated Doshas^[1].

Among these, Virechana Karma (therapeutic purgation) is considered the foremost for eliminating Pitta Dosha, which when aggravated leads to disorders of the gastrointestinal tract, hepatobiliary system, skin, and metabolism^[2]. Charaka defines Virechana as the controlled expulsion of morbid Doshas through the anal route, thereby restoring the equilibrium of Doshas and improving *Agni* (digestive-metabolic fire)^[3]. Sushruta further emphasizes its role in eliminating vitiated Doshas from *Amashaya* and *Pakvashaya* (stomach and intestines) without causing major complications^[4].

From a physiological perspective, Virechana not only relieves local gastrointestinal pathology but also exerts systemic benefits by clearing channels (*Srotoshodhana*), enhancing digestion, improving circulation, and modulating immunity^[5]. Its indications range widely across Kushta (skin diseases), Kamala (jaundice/hepatopathy), Arsha (piles), Amavata (rheumatoid arthritis),

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Prameha (diabetes), obesity, migraine, and psychological disturbances where Pitta or Pitta-associated Doshas are involved [6].

Modern research has provided mechanistic insights into its efficacy. Clinical studies have shown that Virechana therapy reduces inflammatory mediators, regulates gut microbiota, improves insulin sensitivity, and modulates lipid metabolism [7]. In dermatological conditions like psoriasis and eczema, it aids detoxification of Pitta-Rakta, thus reducing recurrence and severity of symptoms [8]. In metabolic disorders such as diabetes mellitus and obesity, Virechana has demonstrated significant improvement in clinical and biochemical parameters [9].

Furthermore, compared to Vamana, Virechana is considered a relatively safer procedure as it causes minimal stress to the patient and can be administered more widely across different age groups with fewer contraindications [10]. Its adaptability

and reproducibility make it one of the most practiced Panchakarma procedures in modern Ayurvedic clinical settings.

Thus, Virechana Karma, rooted in Ayurvedic principles of Shodhana (bio-purification), holds great potential not only in traditional practice but also in contemporary integrative medicine. By bridging classical concepts with emerging biomedical evidence, it can offer novel therapeutic strategies for managing chronic lifestyle and autoimmune diseases.

पित्तप्रधानेषु व्याधिषु विरेचनं श्रेष्ठम् ।

विरुद्धदोषस्थानादप्यन्यत्र दोषान्नयति ॥Charaka Samhita (Siddhi Sthana 6/24-25)

Indications and Contraindications of Virechana Karma

Indications (Yogyata)	Contraindications (Ayogyata)
Pitta-dominant disorders (Pittaja Vyadhi)	Bala (children below 12 years) - weak tolerance
Kushta (skin diseases - psoriasis, eczema, vitiligo, acne)	Vridha (elderly, >70 years) - weak Agni & Dhatus
Kamala (jaundice, hepatopathy)	Garbhini (pregnant women) - risk of miscarriage
Raktapitta (bleeding disorders, epistaxis, menorrhagia)	Sutika (postpartum women) - body in vulnerable state
Arsha (hemorrhoids/piles)	Ativridha Bala (very weak/ emaciated)
Amavata (rheumatoid arthritis)	Kshata-Kshina (injury, chronic debility)
Prameha (diabetes mellitus)	Pipasa & Trishna Adhika (severe dehydration)
Obesity / Sthoulya	

Discussion

Virechana Karma holds a pivotal role in the Panchakarma system of Ayurveda, being the foremost procedure for the elimination of aggravated Pitta Dosha and its associated morbidities. The therapeutic principle behind Virechana lies in the concept of Shodhana (bio-purification), which aims not only at symptomatic relief but also at addressing the root cause of disease through the expulsion of vitiated Doshas from the body. Unlike symptomatic therapies, which provide temporary suppression of clinical features, Virechana offers long-term benefits by cleansing the systemic channels (*Srotas*), thereby preventing recurrence of disease.

तिक्तोष्णं कटु लघु च विरेचनं पित्तनाशनम् ।

दोषान् विशेषतो पित्तं शुद्ध्यर्थं विनियोजयेत् ॥Sushruta Samhita (Chikitsa Sthana 33/4)

From a classical standpoint, Virechana is considered superior in Pitta-dominant disorders such as Kushta (skin diseases), Kamala (hepatobiliary disorders), Raktapitta (bleeding disorders), Prameha (metabolic disorders), Arsha (piles), and Amavata (rheumatoid arthritis). It has also been indicated in psychological disturbances, neurological diseases, and conditions of chronic toxicity. By facilitating the expulsion of morbid Doshas through the gastrointestinal tract, Virechana improves digestion, enhances nutrient absorption, and stabilizes *Agni* (digestive-metabolic fire).

Modern clinical observations support these classical claims by demonstrating measurable physiological and biochemical changes after Virechana therapy. Studies report significant reductions in body weight, blood sugar levels, triglycerides, and inflammatory markers. Additionally, Virechana has been shown to modulate gut microbiota, which plays a crucial role in systemic immunity and metabolism. This highlights the therapy's relevance in the management of lifestyle disorders such as obesity, diabetes mellitus, and dyslipidemia.

In dermatological conditions like psoriasis, vitiligo, and eczema, Virechana has shown beneficial results, reducing recurrence and severity of symptoms. Its mechanism may be linked to the elimination of Pitta-Rakta vitiation, which is considered central in the pathogenesis of skin diseases. Similarly, in neurological disorders like migraine, the therapy provides relief by detoxifying and pacifying aggravated Doshas, thereby reducing the frequency and intensity of attacks.

Another important aspect is the relative safety and adaptability of Virechana. Compared to Vamana (therapeutic emesis), which requires careful patient selection and carries more complications, Virechana can be safely administered in a broader population with minimal risks when performed correctly. This makes it a more widely accepted Panchakarma therapy in clinical practice.

Despite these promising outcomes, there remain challenges in standardizing Virechana procedures for modern clinical application. Variability in drug selection, dose, patient selection, and protocol execution can influence the results. Moreover, large-scale randomized controlled trials are limited, making it difficult to establish strong evidence for its integration into mainstream healthcare. However, the increasing interest in integrative medicine and holistic detoxification therapies provides a fertile ground for expanding the scope of Virechana in global health care.

Conclusion

Virechana Karma, one of the principal procedures of Panchakarma, is a cornerstone of Ayurvedic purification therapy with both preventive and curative potential. Rooted in the concept of eliminating aggravated Pitta Dosha, it plays a vital role in maintaining systemic balance, enhancing digestive fire, and promoting overall health. Classical texts highlight its application in a wide range of disorders, particularly those of metabolic, dermatological, gastrointestinal, autoimmune, and psychological origin.

Modern clinical observations further validate its therapeutic efficacy, showing improvements in metabolic regulation, reduction of systemic inflammation, correction of gut dysbiosis, and enhancement of immune function. Its relatively safe profile, adaptability, and wide applicability make it one of the most practiced Panchakarma therapies in contemporary clinical practice.

Thus, Virechana stands as a unique therapeutic modality that bridges ancient wisdom with modern healthcare needs. It not only provides symptomatic relief but also addresses the root cause of disease through systemic detoxification. With further research and standardization, Virechana has the potential to be integrated more effectively into global health systems as a safe, evidence-based detoxification therapy.

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