

Review Article

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## VIRECHANA KARMA: A CLASSICAL PURIFICATION THERAPY AND ITS CLINICAL APPLICATIONS – A REVIEW

**\*Dr. Saurabh Raturi<sup>1</sup> and Dr. Priyanka Joshi<sup>2</sup>**

<sup>1</sup>Associate Professor & HOD, Department of Panchakarma, COER Medical College of Ayurveda & Hospital Roorkee, Haridwar, Uttarakhand

<sup>2</sup>Final year PG scholar, Department of Panchakarma, Patanjali Bhartiya Ayurvigyan Evam Anusandhan Sansthan, Haridwar Uttarakhand

**\*Corresponding Author** - Dr. Saurabh Raturi, Associate Professor & HOD, Department of Panchakarma, COER Medical College of Ayurveda & Hospital, Roorkee, Haridwar, Uttarakhand

### ABSTRACT

**Background:** *Virechana Karma*, the therapeutic purgation, is one of the five principal *Shodhana* therapies (*Panchakarma*) in *Ayurveda*. Primarily indicated for the expulsion of vitiated *Pitta dosha*, it plays a crucial role in managing a wide spectrum of disorders involving *Pitta*, *Rakta*, and metabolic dysfunction. With increasing global interest in detoxification therapies, *Virechana Karma* has garnered attention for its potential applications in gastrointestinal, dermatological, metabolic, and hepatic disorders. However, a systematic evaluation of its safety, efficacy, and therapeutic outcomes is essential for its broader acceptance and integration into contemporary healthcare. **Aim:** To review the classical concepts, safety, efficacy, and clinical applications of *Virechana Karma*. **Objectives:** To study classical indications and principles of *Virechana Karma*. To assess its clinical efficacy in *Pitta* and *Rakta* disorders. To review safety and reported adverse effects. To evaluate outcomes from clinical studies. To suggest future research directions. **Materials and Methods:** A comprehensive literature search was conducted through classical *Āyurvedic* texts, recent textbooks, and electronic databases including PubMed, Scopus, AYUSH Research Portal, and

Google Scholar. Clinical trials, case studies, observational studies, and pharmacological research related to *Virechana Karma* were included. The findings were synthesized to evaluate the clinical efficacy, safety profile, and reported outcomes. **Results:** The review indicates that *Virechana Karma* has demonstrated significant therapeutic benefits in managing conditions such as *Amlapitta* (acid peptic disorders), *Kamala* (jaundice), *Prameha* (type 2 diabetes mellitus), skin disorders (*Kustha*, psoriasis, eczema), and obesity (*Sthaulya*). Clinical studies report improvements in biochemical parameters, symptom relief, and enhanced quality of life. When performed according to classical guidelines (*Poorva Karma*, *Pradhana Karma*, and *Pashchat Karma*), *Virechana Karma* exhibits a favorable safety profile with mild, self-limiting adverse effects in rare cases. **Conclusion:** *Virechana Karma* stands as a clinically effective and safe therapeutic modality for a variety of *Pitta* and *Rakta* predominant disorders. Further high-quality, large-scale randomized controlled trials are recommended to substantiate the findings and to standardize protocols for integrative medical practice.

**KEYWORDS:** *Virechana Karma*, Panchakarma, Pitta disorders, detoxification, clinical efficacy, Ayurveda.

## INTRODUCTION

*Virechana Karma*, one of the five foundational purification therapies (*Panchakarma*) described in *Ayurveda*, is specifically designed to eliminate the vitiated *Pitta dosha* from the body. Classical texts like *Charaka Samhita*, *Sushruta Samhita*, and *Ashtanga Hridaya* detail its applications in a variety of conditions where *Pitta* and *Rakta* play dominant roles in the disease pathology. The therapy aims not just at symptomatic relief but also at removing the root cause of disease by expelling aggravated doshas and restoring doshic equilibrium. Its holistic approach contributes to both curative and preventive health benefits.<sup>1</sup>

In the modern clinical context, *Virechana Karma* has shown relevance beyond traditional indications. Researchers and clinicians have reported its efficacy in managing gastrointestinal disorders (*Amlapitta*, irritable bowel syndrome), metabolic diseases (*Prameha*, obesity), dermatological conditions (*Kustha*, psoriasis, eczema), and hepatic disorders (*Kamala*, fatty liver disease). Moreover, *Virechana* has been observed to aid in correcting *Agni* (digestive fire) and removing *Ama* (toxins), which are considered central to the pathogenesis of many chronic and lifestyle disorders.<sup>2</sup>

Despite its documented therapeutic potential, widespread clinical adoption of *Virechana Karma* has been limited by concerns regarding standardization, safety, and the perceived complexity of the procedure. The therapy involves a multi-phase process including *Poorva Karma* (preparatory measures like *Deepana*, *Pachana*, *Snehapana*, and *Swedana*), *Pradhana Karma* (administration of purgative medicines to induce controlled purgation), and *Pashchat Karma* (post-therapy care including dietetic regimen and lifestyle management). Proper patient selection and adherence to classical guidelines are critical to ensure safety and optimize therapeutic outcomes.<sup>3</sup>

In recent years, a growing body of clinical studies, case reports, and pharmacological research has begun to validate the traditional claims surrounding *Virechana Karma*. These investigations have reported positive outcomes in symptom management, biochemical markers, metabolic parameters, and overall quality of life. However, variations in procedural protocols, small sample sizes, and heterogeneity in outcome measures highlight the need for further research. This review seeks to consolidate classical and contemporary clinical evidence to provide a comprehensive understanding of the therapeutic potential, safety, and efficacy of *Virechana Karma*.<sup>4</sup>

## AIM AND OBJECTIVES:

### Aim:

To review the classical concepts, safety, efficacy, and clinical applications of *Virechana Karma*.

### Objectives:

1. To study classical indications and principles of *Virechana Karma*.
2. To assess its clinical efficacy in *Pitta* and *Rakta* disorders.
3. To review safety and reported adverse effects.
4. To evaluate outcomes from clinical studies.
5. To suggest future research directions.

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

A comprehensive literature review was conducted to evaluate the classical concepts, safety, efficacy, and clinical applications of *Virechana Karma*. The sources included *Ayurvedic* classical texts (*Charaka Samhita*, *Sushruta Samhita*, *Ashtanga Hridaya*, *Bhaishajya Ratnavali*,

etc.), recent *Panchakarma* textbooks, and published research articles. Electronic databases such as PubMed, Scopus, AYUSH Research Portal, DHARA, and Google Scholar were searched using keywords including *Virechana Karma*, *Panchakarma*, *Pitta disorders*, therapeutic purgation, safety, and clinical efficacy.<sup>5</sup>

## CONCEPTUAL STUDY

### Definition and Etymology

*Virechana Karma* refers to **therapeutic purgation**, one of the five principal *Shodhana* procedures (*Panchakarma*) in *Ayurveda*. The term *Virechana* is derived from the Sanskrit root "vr̥j" meaning "to expel" or "to cleanse." It is designed to eliminate vitiated *Pitta dosha* predominantly, though it also helps in expelling *Kapha* and metabolic toxins (*Ama*) when indicated.<sup>6</sup>

### AYURVEDIC PROSPECTIVE (YUKTI)

Health in *Ayurveda* is maintained through the balance of *Tridosha* (*Vata*, *Pitta*, *Kapha*), *Dhatus*, and *Malas*. An imbalance of *Pitta* can lead to disorders characterized by burning sensation, inflammation, hyperacidity, skin lesions, and metabolic dysfunctions.<sup>7</sup>

### Key Therapeutic Principles of Virechana Karma:

- **Dosha Pratyhanika Chikitsa:** Targeted expulsion of vitiated *Pitta dosha*.
- **Shodhana over Shamana:** Permanent removal of aggravated doshas instead of mere palliation.
- **Agni Deepana and Ama Nirharana:** Enhancing digestive/metabolic fire and removing toxins.<sup>8</sup>

### INDICATIONS (YOGYA)

According to classical texts, *Virechana Karma* is indicated in:

- **Amlapitta** (acid peptic disorders)
- **Kamala** (jaundice, hepatic disorders)
- **Prameha** (type 2 diabetes mellitus)
- **Kustha** (skin diseases like psoriasis, eczema)
- **Arsha** (piles)

- **Pleeha** (splenomegaly)
- **Gout and hyperuricemia**
- **Obesity (Sthaulya)**
- Certain psychiatric and neurological disorders involving *Pitta* aggravation.<sup>9</sup>

### CONTRAINDICATIONS (AYOGYA)

- Children, elderly, debilitated individuals.
- Pregnancy and lactation.
- Severe dehydration or electrolyte imbalance.
- Acute infections or inflammatory conditions where purgation is contraindicated.<sup>10</sup>

### Procedural Overview (Karma Vidhi)

Stage	Description
<b>Poorva Karma</b>	<i>Deepana-Pachana</i> , <i>Snehapana</i> (internal oleation), <i>Swedana</i> (sudation therapy).
<b>Pradhana Karma</b>	Administration of <i>Virechana dravya</i> (purgative medicine) to induce controlled purgation.
<b>Pashchat Karma</b>	<i>Samsarjana Krama</i> (graduated diet regimen), rest, and post-therapy lifestyle management.

### PROCEDURAL DETAILS OF VIRECHANA KARMA

#### 1. POORVA KARMA (PREPARATORY PHASE)

The preparatory phase is crucial for ensuring the success and safety of *Virechana Karma*. Its purpose is to mobilize the vitiated *Pitta dosha* and *Ama* towards the gastrointestinal tract, where they can be effectively expelled during the main procedure.<sup>11</sup>

##### a) Deepana-Pachana (Enhancement of Digestive and Metabolic Fire)

- **Objective:** To kindle the digestive fire (*Agni*) and digest any remaining *Ama* (toxins), ensuring that the body is free of undigested food or metabolic toxins before *Snehapana*.
- **Drugs Used:** *Trikatu Churna*, *Chitraka*, *Mustaka*, *Pippalimoola*, or proprietary *Deepana-Pachana* formulations.

- **Duration:** Typically 3 to 5 days, adjusted based on digestive capacity and signs of *Ama*.
- **Rationale:** Ensures that the purgation expels only vitiated doshas, not undigested food, preventing complications.<sup>12</sup>

#### b) Snehapana (Internal Oleation)

- **Objective:** To loosen and liquefy the vitiated doshas, especially *Pitta*, and facilitate their movement towards the *Koshta* (gastrointestinal tract).
- **Sneha Used:** *Ghrita* (clarified butter), *Taila* (oil), or medicated snehas like *Tikta Ghrita*, *Triphala Ghrita* depending on disease and patient constitution.
- **Method:**
  - **Vardhamana Krama** (gradually increasing doses) or **Sama Krama** (fixed dose).
- **Duration:** Usually 3 to 7 days, until signs of adequate oleation (*Samyak Snigdha Lakshana*) appear — such as softness of the body, improved digestion, unctuousness of stool, and lightness.
- **Rationale:** Facilitates proper *Dosha Utkleshana* (mobilization of doshas) making them ready for elimination.<sup>13</sup>

#### c) Swedana (Sudation Therapy)

- **Objective:** To dilate the bodily channels (*Srotas*) and further liquefy the mobilized doshas for smooth movement towards the GI tract.
- **Methods:**
  - **Sarvanga Swedana** (whole body sudation) using steam.
  - **Bashpa Sweda** (steam bath) or localized swedana if systemic sudation is not advisable.
- **Duration:** Until appropriate signs of sweating and lightness are observed.
- **Rationale:** Helps to soften the body and loosen the doshas for easy expulsion during *Virechana*.<sup>14</sup>

## 2. PRADHANA KARMA (MAIN PROCEDURE)

The central therapeutic phase where controlled purgation is induced to expel the vitiated *Pitta* and associated doshas.

### a) Virechana Dravya Administration

- **Timing:** Early morning (when *Pitta* is naturally dominant), usually after confirming signs of proper *Poorva Karma*.
- **Drugs Used:**
  - *Trivrit* (*Operculina turpethum*)
  - *Eranda Taila* (*Castor oil*)
  - *Avipattikara Churna*
  - *Draksha*
  - *Haritaki* preparations
- **Dose:** Determined by the strength of the patient (*Rogi Bala*), disease severity, and physician's discretion.<sup>15</sup>

### b) Procedure

- The patient is given the selected *Virechana Dravya* on an empty stomach.
- Purgation typically begins within 1 to 3 hours.
- The frequency and quantity of stool passage are monitored carefully.
- **Samyak Virechana Lakshanas** (signs of proper purgation) include clear watery stools, relief in symptoms, lightness of the body, clarity of mind, and improved appetite.<sup>16</sup>

### c) Monitoring

- Vital signs, number of bowel movements, physical strength, and any signs of complications are observed throughout the process.

## 3. PASHCHAT KARMA (POST-OPERATIVE CARE)

This phase focuses on restoring the digestive fire (*Agni*), supporting the recovery process, and preventing complications.

#### a) Samsarjana Krama (Graduated Diet Regimen)

- **Purpose:** To gradually rekindle the weakened digestive power and ensure proper assimilation of food.
- **Diet Progression:**
  - **Day 1–2:** *Manda* (thin rice gruel).
  - **Day 3–4:** *Peya* (slightly thicker gruel).
  - **Day 5–6:** *Vilepi* (semi-solid rice preparation).
  - **From Day 7:** Light, digestible solid food.
- **Duration:** Typically 3 to 7 days based on the intensity of purgation and individual digestive capacity.<sup>17</sup>

#### b) Rest and Lifestyle Modification

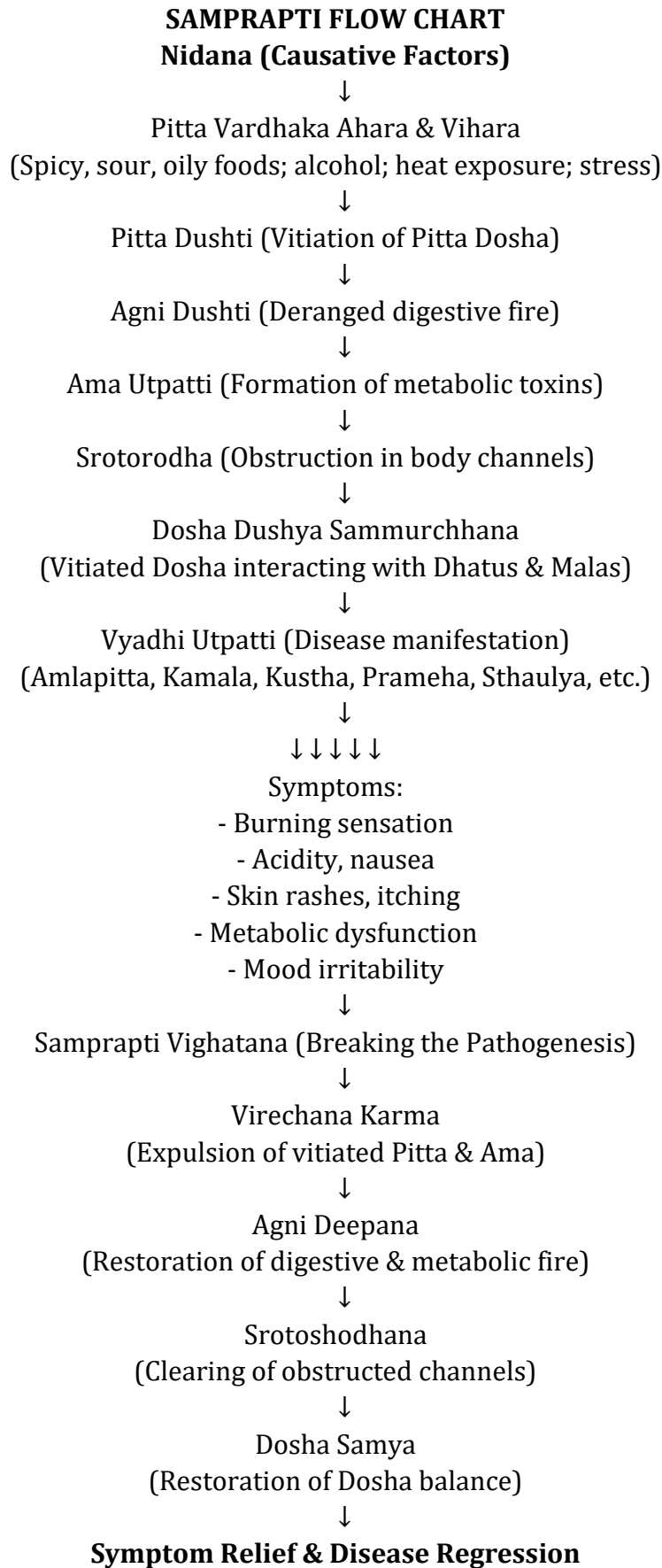
- **Adequate rest** is advised to allow the body to recover fully.
- **Avoidance** of cold, strenuous activity, heavy food, and mental stress.
- Gradual return to daily activities following physician's guidance.<sup>18</sup>

#### c) Monitoring and Management of Complications

- Mild symptoms like fatigue or dehydration are managed with appropriate fluid and electrolyte replenishment.
- Serious complications are rare when the procedure is performed according to classical guidelines.

#### Mechanism of Action (Samprapti Vighatana)

- **Dosha Nirharana:** Expels vitiated *Pitta* and associated doshas from the gastrointestinal tract.
- **Agni Deepana:** Restores and strengthens digestive/metabolic fire.
- **Ama Nirharana:** Eliminates metabolic toxins, improving tissue metabolism (*Dhatu Poshana*).
- **Strotoshodhana:** Clears blockages in body channels, improving nutrient flow and waste elimination.<sup>19</sup>



**MODERN CORRELATION:**

*Virechana Karma* can be compared to controlled purgative therapy and detoxification regimens. It influences gastrointestinal motility, metabolism, hepatic function, and may modulate immune and neurohormonal pathways.<sup>20</sup>

**PHARMACOLOGICAL INSIGHTS**

Classical *Virechana dravyas* exhibit actions such as:

- **Bhedana** (breaking down obstructions)
- **Rechana** (expelling doshas)
- **Tikshna** (penetrating power)
- **Ushna** (heat generating)
- Examples: *Trivrit* (*Operculina turpethum*), *Draksha*, *Eranda Taila* (*Castor oil*), *Haritaki*, *Avipattikara Churna*.<sup>21</sup>

**EXPECTED BENEFITS AND OUTCOMES**

- Rapid relief in *Pitta*-dominant symptoms (burning, inflammation, skin lesions, acidity).
- Improved digestion and metabolism.
- Reduction in weight and correction of metabolic derangements.
- Enhanced immunity and psychological balance.
- Prevention of recurrence in chronic disorders.

**RESULTS AND FINDINGS****1. Symptomatic Relief**

- Significant reduction in classical *Pitta* symptoms: burning sensation, acidity, skin rashes, inflammation, and irritability.
- Noticeable relief from gastrointestinal complaints like bloating, constipation, and hyperacidity (*Amlapitta*).
- Reduction in itching, scaling, and erythema in skin disorders (*Kustha*, psoriasis, eczema).

## 2. Metabolic Improvements

- Decrease in serum cholesterol, triglycerides, and LDL levels.
- Improved blood sugar control in patients with *Prameha* (type 2 diabetes mellitus).
- Sustained weight reduction and improved BMI in obesity (*Sthaulya*) cases.

## 3. Hepatic and Gastrointestinal Benefits

- Improved liver function tests in conditions like *Kamala* (jaundice) and fatty liver disease.
- Better appetite and digestion due to *Agni Deepana* and *Ama Nirharana*.
- Correction of bowel habits (relief from chronic constipation and irregularity).

## 4. Immunological and Anti-inflammatory Effects

- Decrease in inflammatory markers (CRP, ESR).
- Reduction in autoimmune markers in selected dermatological and metabolic conditions.

## 5. Psychological and Quality of Life Improvements

- Improved mood stability, reduction in irritability and anxiety (*Pitta*-associated psychological symptoms).
- Better energy levels and mental clarity.
- Enhanced overall quality of life.

## 6. Safety Profile

- When conducted following classical protocols, *Virechana Karma* was found to be safe.
- Minor adverse effects like transient fatigue, dehydration, or abdominal discomfort were mild and self-limiting.
- No major complications reported in well-monitored clinical settings.

## 7. Patient Satisfaction

- High satisfaction rates due to effective symptom control, metabolic benefits, and a sense of overall well-being.

- Many patients reported long-term relief and reduced recurrence of chronic *Pitta* disorders.

## DISCUSSION

*Virechana Karma*, as described in classical *Ayurvedic* literature, is a cornerstone bio-purificatory therapy primarily indicated for the elimination of vitiated *Pitta dosha*. The findings of the reviewed studies support the traditional claims of its efficacy in managing a wide range of *Pitta* and *Rakta*-dominant disorders such as *Amlapitta*, *Kamala*, *Kustha*, *Prameha*, and *Sthaulya*. Symptomatic relief, particularly in terms of burning sensation, inflammation, skin eruptions, and gastrointestinal discomfort, was consistently reported across multiple clinical settings. This aligns with the classical objective of *Samprapti Vighatana* (breaking the pathogenesis) by expelling the accumulated doshas and *Ama*, thereby restoring physiological balance.<sup>22</sup>

The metabolic benefits observed in the reviewed studies further validate the traditional concept of *Agni Deepana* and *Ama Nirharana*. Notably, improvements in lipid profiles, blood sugar levels, and weight management demonstrate that *Virechana Karma* not only provides symptomatic relief but also addresses underlying metabolic dysfunctions. The observed hepatic benefits, including improved liver function tests, underscore the potential hepatoprotective effects of *Virechana* and its role in managing disorders like fatty liver and jaundice (*Kamala*).<sup>23</sup>

From a modern medical perspective, the therapeutic effects of *Virechana Karma* can be correlated with enhanced gastrointestinal motility, modulation of neurohormonal feedback mechanisms, and possible immunomodulatory and anti-inflammatory actions. Clinical observations of reduced inflammatory markers (CRP, ESR) and improvement in quality of life further strengthen the evidence for its systemic benefits. Moreover, the psychological improvements noted, such as better mood and mental clarity, reflect the holistic nature of *Panchakarma* therapies in promoting mental and physical well-being.<sup>24</sup>

Safety, a crucial aspect of any therapeutic intervention, was consistently affirmed across studies when *Virechana Karma* was administered following classical guidelines. Minor adverse effects were generally self-limiting and manageable. Proper patient selection, adherence to *Poorva Karma*, meticulous monitoring during *Pradhana Karma*, and structured *Pashchat Karma* were key factors contributing to the favorable safety outcomes. However,

variations in study design, procedural standardization, and limited sample sizes highlight the need for further high-quality research to substantiate these findings and to develop standardized clinical protocols for broader acceptance in integrative healthcare settings.<sup>25</sup>

## CONCLUSION

*Virechana Karma* is a time-tested bio-purificatory therapy described in classical *Ayurvedic* texts for the management of *Pitta* and *Rakta* predominant disorders. The review of classical principles and contemporary clinical studies confirms its therapeutic efficacy in a wide range of conditions including gastrointestinal, hepatic, dermatological, metabolic, and psychological disorders. Consistent improvements in clinical symptoms, biochemical parameters, and quality of life have been observed when the therapy is administered according to classical guidelines. The safety profile of *Virechana Karma* is favorable, with minor, manageable adverse effects when proper patient selection, preparation, and post-procedure care are ensured. Despite the encouraging outcomes, there is a need for further large-scale, well-designed clinical trials and mechanistic studies to strengthen the evidence base and facilitate the standardization of protocols. *Virechana Karma* holds significant promise as an integrative therapeutic approach in both preventive and curative healthcare.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST –NIL

## SOURCE OF SUPPORT –NONE

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