

in men houses the 'Room of Sperm'. The *Golden Mirror of Medicine* (Yi Zong Jin Jian, 1742) says: 'The Governing Vessel arises within the lower abdomen, externally in the abdomen, internally in the Bao ... also called Dan Tian in both men and women; in women it is the Uterus, in men it is the Room of Sperm'.³ This passage clearly shows that *bao* is a structure common to both men and women being the Uterus in women and the 'Room of Sperm' in men. As we shall see, the Extraordinary Vessels arise from this area.

The Uterus is one of the six 'extra Yang organs'. These organs have the shape of a Yang organ and the function of a Yin organ. The Uterus's shape is hollow and menstruation and labour are an expression of its function of discharging (as a Yang organ). On the other hand, the Uterus stores Blood and nourishes the fetus during pregnancy (an expression of its function as a Yin organ).

The Uterus is related to the Kidneys via a channel called the Uterus Channel (*Bao Luo*). In Chapter 47, the *Simple Questions* says: 'The Uterus Channel extends to the Kidneys'.⁴

The Uterus is also physiologically related to the Heart via a channel called the Uterus Vessel (*Bao Mai*). In Chapter 33 the *Simple Questions* says: 'The Uterus Vessel pertains to the Heart and extends to the Uterus' and 'When the period does not come it means the Uterus Vessel is obstructed' (Fig. 2.1).⁵

Hence normal menstruation and fertility depend on the state of the Kidney-Essence and Heart-Blood. If Heart-Blood is deficient, Heart-Qi does not descend to the Uterus. If the Kidney-Essence is deficient, menstruation does not occur. A deficiency in either Heart or Kidneys can therefore cause infertility or amenorrhoea. Figure 2.2 shows the connection between the Uterus and the internal organs.

'Uterus' has a broad definition in Chinese medicine, encompassing structures beyond the uterus itself, including the Fallopian tubes and the ovaries. Thus, the 'Uterus' and, in particular, the Kidneys are responsible for all the functions that in Western medicine are related to uterus, tubes and ovaries, and indeed including the hypothalamus-pituitary-ovarian axis. Interestingly, in Western medicine too there is a connection between the uterus and ovaries. There is

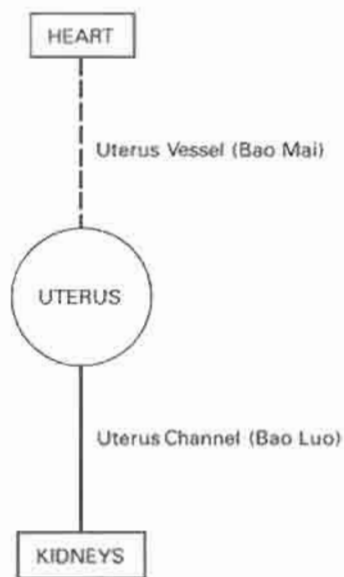


Fig. 2.1 The Uterus connection with Kidneys and Heart.

evidence that hysterectomy with conservation of the ovaries is associated with earlier ovarian failure and this may be due to a reduction in the blood supply to the ovaries following surgical clamping of the uterine arteries. Animal studies have shown that uterine tissue is necessary to ensure the development of ovarian follicles.⁶

Physiology of menstruation

Menarche (the onset of the first menstrual period) statistically starts at 12.8 years of age in industrialized countries, with a range of 10 to 16 years. In the United Kingdom menarche occurs between the ages of 11 and 15 in 95% of girls. In China, menarche occurs within the 13–15 age range in the overwhelming majority of girls.⁷ Menarche occurring before the age of 10 is considered premature, and menarche is delayed if it has not occurred by the age of 16.

The mean age of menopause is 50; if it occurs before the age of 35 it is termed premature, and if it has not occurred by the age of 55, delayed. From a Western medical perspective, the menstrual cycle occurs every 21–36 days and lasts 3–7 days, with the woman losing an average

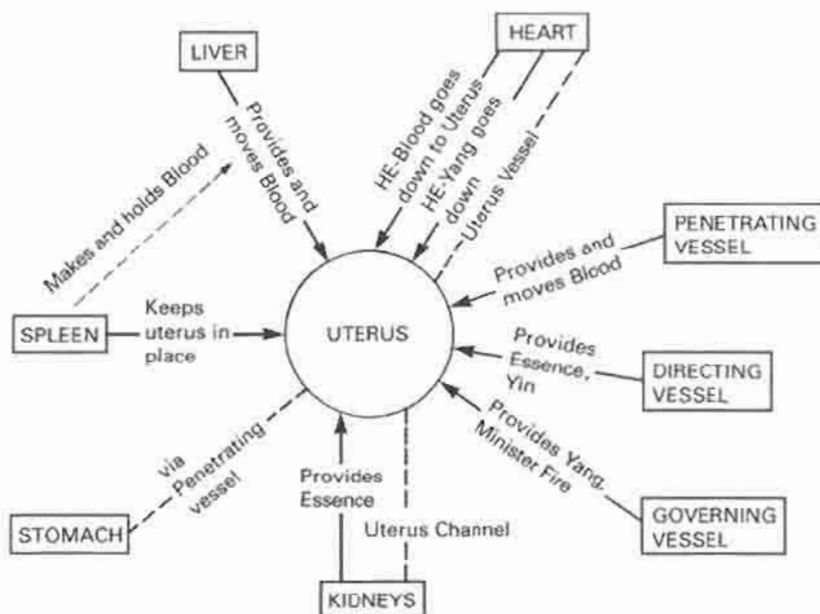


Fig. 2.2 The Uterus and Internal Organs.

amount of 30–80 ml. The colour is usually dark-red, lighter at the beginning, deep in the middle, and pinkish at the end of the period. The normal flow does not coagulate and there are no clots; the blood is neither dilute nor thick. A study of 321 women showed that the commonest cycle lengths were 5 and 6 days, found in 49 per cent of women.⁸

The above range of the 'normal' values from a Western medical perspective is somewhat broader than what would be considered 'normal' in Chinese medicine. For example, in Chinese medicine a range of 26 to 32 days would be regarded as more normal for the length of the menstrual cycle than a range of 21 to 36 days. It should be stressed here that regularity of the cycle is all-important: if the cycle length varies from month to month, this would be considered abnormal even if it fell within the 26–32 days range. On the other hand, were the period to occur regularly every 32 days, this would be considered normal. Similarly, Chinese medicine would consider a duration of 4–6 days for menstruation as more 'normal' than that of 3–7.

Four separate phases can be identified within the menstrual cycle (Fig. 2.3):

1. *Menstrual phase* (about 5 days). During this phase Blood is moving, for which it relies on the free flow of Liver-Qi and Liver-Blood. From a Western medical perspective, during this phase there is a sharp fall in oestrogen and progesterone levels and necrosis of the compact and spongy layers of the endometrium.

2. *Post-menstrual phase* (about 7 days). During this phase Blood and Yin are relatively empty and the Penetrating and Directing vessels are depleted. From a Western point of view, this is the follicular phase during which the follicle grows and oestrogen levels rise under the influence of the follicle-stimulating hormone (FSH).

3. *Mid-cycle phase* (about 7 days). During this phase Blood and Yin gradually fill up in the Penetrating and Directing vessels. From the Western point of view, this is the ovulatory phase during which the ovum is released from the follicle and the corpus luteum develops under the influence of the luteinizing hormone (LH).

4. *Pre-menstrual phase* (about 7 days). During this phase Yang Qi rises and Liver-Qi moves in preparation for the period. The mobilization of

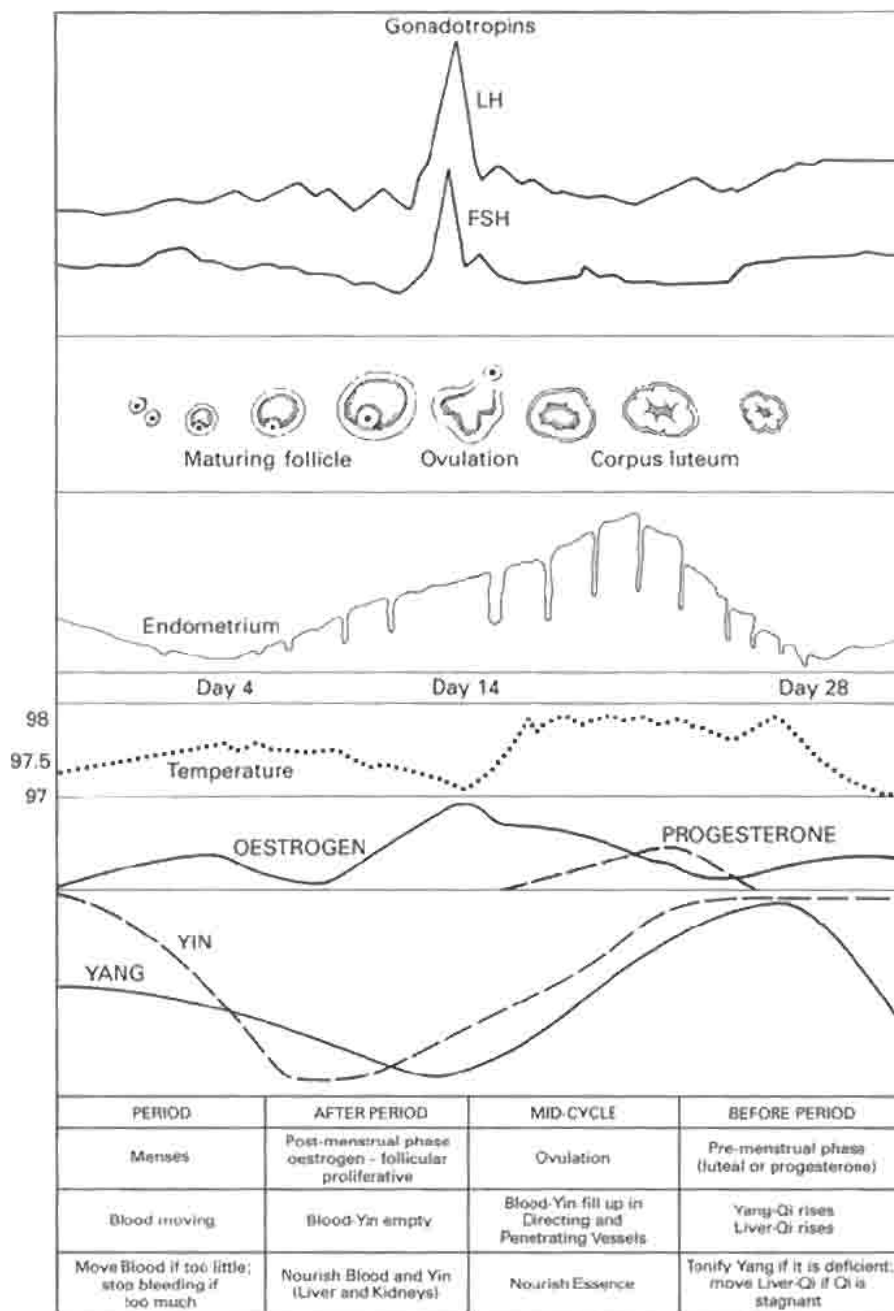


Fig. 2.3 The four phases of the menstrual cycle.

Liver-Qi is essential to move Liver-Blood during the period. From the Western point of view, this is the luteal phase during which the corpus luteum grows and secretes progesterone.

It is useful to distinguish these four phases within the menstrual cycle because the treatment principle and strategy can often be decided according to them. For example, one can identify

four different treatment aims in each of the phases as follows:

- *Menstrual phase.* Move blood if period is scanty, stop bleeding if it is heavy.
- *Post-menstrual phase.* Nourish Blood and Yin (Liver and Kidneys).
- *Mid-cycle phase.* Promote ovulation by nourishing the Essence (Kidneys).
- *Pre-menstrual phase.* Tonify Yang if it is deficient, move Liver-Qi if it is stagnant.

The four different phases can also be used to adapt the treatment strategy to the time of the cycle. For example, if we want to nourish Blood, the second phase would be the best time to do it, and the fourth phase definitely inadvisable. If we want to tonify Liver and Kidneys, and especially the Essence, the second and third phases would be the most appropriate time. If we want to move Liver-Qi the fourth phase is the best time for it.

Menstruation and internal organs

Kidneys

The Kidneys are the root of Pre-Natal Essence and the root of the Original Qi. They store the Essence which is the material basis for the formation of menstrual Blood. In particular the Kidney-Essence is the origin for the formation of the *Tian Gui* (Heavenly *Gui*, 'gui' being the 10th Heavenly Stem), the material substance of menstrual Blood. At puberty the Heavenly *Gui* is crystallized and gives rise to the periods. Chapter 1 of the *Simple Questions* says: 'At 14 the Heavenly *Gui* comes into play, the Directing Vessel circulates strongly, the Penetrating Vessel is flourishing, the menses come at regular intervals and the girl can procreate'.⁹ Menstrual Blood is called 'Heavenly *Gui*' because it represents the descending of Heavenly *Gui* materializing into Water: in fact, the 10th stem *gui* pertains to Water. The *Great Treatise of Beneficial Formulae for Women* (1237) explains: 'When the girl is 14 the Heavenly *Gui* arrives, the Directing Vessel is open, the Penetrating

Vessel is flourishing and the period arrives. 'Heavenly' indicates the descending of the True Qi of Heaven; 'Gui' indicates Water [as this stem pertains to Water]: [menstrual Blood is therefore] like heavenly clouds generating water'.¹⁰

In fact, Fu Qing Zhu (1607-1684) holds that menstrual blood is not Blood but Heavenly *Gui* which originates from the Kidneys. He says it is formed from Kidney-Yin but with the participation of Heart-Yang (another way in which the Heart influences menstruation), and that despite being blood-red in colour it is not Blood; hence its name of Heavenly *Gui*.¹¹ He also says that the generation of the Heavenly *Gui* has nothing to do with Heart, Liver, or Spleen: these organs only help its transformation into Blood. His original passage says: 'Menstrual blood is not Blood but Heavenly Water, originating within the Kidneys, it is the essence of extreme Yin and Qi of extreme Yang. It is red like blood but it is not blood. That is why it is called Heavenly *Gui*. People nowadays regard menstrual blood as Blood, a mistake perpetuated for 1000 years ... in fact it is not called blood-water [*xue shui*] but menstrual water [*jing shui*] ... the generation of Kidney Water [and therefore menstrual blood] has nothing to do with Heart, Liver and Spleen, but the transformation of Kidney Water is helped by Heart, Liver or Spleen'.¹² It should be emphasized that while menstrual blood is a form of Heavenly *Gui*, this is not only menstrual blood as it is also the origin of sperm in men.

Thus, the Kidney Essence, being the basis of the Heavenly *Gui*, greatly influences the physiology of women and especially puberty, fertility, conception, pregnancy and menopause. Thus, the Water of the Kidneys, or Kidney-Yin, is the material basis for menstrual Blood. Fu Qing Zhu makes this point by saying that it is not by chance that menstrual blood is called *jing shui*, i.e. 'period water', rather than *jing xue* ('period blood').¹³ Tang Zong Hai in his *Discussion of Blood Syndromes* (1885) says: 'Fluids transformed by Qi turn red and form Blood which, following the Directing and Penetrating vessels, joins the Heavenly *Gui* Water below in both men and women. Men pertain to Qi and, in them, Blood is transformed from Water to make Sperm; women pertain to Blood and, in them, Blood is transformed from Water to make menstrual blood. Thus, in men there is Blood within