

• Review

Prevention and treatment of constipation in children from the perspective of Iranian traditional medicine

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ABSTRACT

Constipation is one of the most common complaints of children and a common cause of referrals to pediatricians. Numerous reasons for this disease have been mentioned in the Iranian traditional medicine (ITM). It is believed that this disorder is mostly due to the lack of consideration of the six essential principles (*Setteh-ye-Zarurieah*), which are necessary to maintain health and prevent disease. In this descriptive study we collected and classified the concepts related to the topic by reviewing reliable ITM text books. Scientific databases were also searched for the most commonly used herbs in the treatment of constipation. The results showed that, from the perspective of ITM, the first step in treating constipation in children is making lifestyle changes. This includes giving appropriate training in the six essential principles, and making modification in existing habits where necessary. In the next steps, using some herbal remedies for topical or oral administration is recommended. On the other hand, a few clinical trials have been done concerning the effects of herbal medicines on pediatric constipation. Therefore, ITM's preventive and curative strategies can provide an efficient and cost-effective way to address constipation in children. This study can serve as a preface to performing clinical studies in this field.

Keywords: children; constipation; Iranian traditional medicine; six essential principles

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1 Introduction

Constipation is a common problem, affecting up to 30% of children, and accounting for an estimated 3%–5% of all visits to pediatricians and 10%–25% referrals to gastroenterology clinics^[1]. Constipation has been accounted for a prevalence rate of up to 43% among hospitalized children^[2]. Most studies report similar

prevalence rates for boys and girls^[1].

Functional constipation is responsible for more than 95% of constipation in healthy children one year and older, and is particularly common among preschool-aged children^[3].

There is not one specific definition for constipation, but the general range of symptoms include bowel movements fewer than three times per week, hard and pebbly stool

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that is difficult to pass, painful defecation, and a feeling of incomplete evacuation^[4,5]. There are a wide range of prevention and treatment interventions, which can greatly improve the quality of life in children^[6]. However, there is no information concerning the maximum dosage, course of treatment and long-term side effects of the applied medications in treating pediatric constipation, therefore treatment is symptomatic and largely reliant on clinical experience^[7].

Herbal therapy text books and reference books contain information on constipation. However, there is not a separate chapter dedicated to pediatric herbal therapy and there are few articles published on the advantages and limitations of herbal medicines in children^[8].

Iranian traditional medicine (ITM) is one of the complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) that has many strategies to prevent and treat diseases in various stages of life, including childhood.

Considering the popularity of CAM therapies in recent years—often due to parents' desires for non-invasive therapies that are easy to access—this study was carried out to review the literature on preventive and curative approaches and recommendations of ITM in childhood constipation. The study aims to find the most cost- and therapeutically-effective methods to relieve the symptoms of chronic functional constipation in children.

2 Methods

We reviewed the ITM recommendations for constipation in children mentioned in the highest number of reference books in ITM, including the *Al-Qanun fi al-Tibb*^[9], *Zakhireye Kharazmshahi*^[10], *Exir-e-Azam*^[11], *Kholase al-Hekmah*^[12], *Mufarrih al-Qulub*^[13], *Resale fi Alaj al-Atfal*^[14], *Tadbir al-Sebyan*^[15] and *Tadbir al-Hobali val-Atfal val-Sebyan*^[16]. Our traditional words for extracting the first results were “*Eateghal-e-batn*”,

“*Aghl-e-Batn*”, “*Yoboosat-e-Mezaj*”, “*Ghabz-e-Shekam*” and “*Hasr-e-Tabia'r*” which were synonymous with constipation, combined with “*Atfal*” and “*Sebyan*” which were synonymous with children. Also, textbooks of internal medicine and pediatrics such as *Harrison's Principles of Internal Medicine*^[4] and *Nelson Essentials of Pediatrics*^[5] were used to identify some terms related to pediatric constipation, then the terms were cross-searched. Traditional names of the medicinal materia in ITM used to treat pediatric constipation were matched to scientific names used in botanical textbooks^[17,18].

On the next step, the most frequently used and accessible plants were selected and a literature search was performed in the scientific databases including PubMed, ScienceDirect, Google Scholar, Iranmedex and SID (the last two are Iranian databases). For this purpose, the terms “constipation” and “pediatric constipation” in combination with the scientific plant names were used as the keywords. Data were collected in English from the year 1915 until April 2015. Related results were classified and readout repeatedly by authors to create main themes. Finally, “content analysis” was used for data analyzing.

3 Results

3.1 Definition of constipation

Having an adequate definition of constipation requires that we explain the characteristics of normal stool. Masters of ITM have suggested some characteristics for normal stool, which were listed below in Table 1.

Thus from the perspective of ITM, constipation refers to (1) fecal amount is proportionally less than the amount of food ingested; or (2) hard and dry stool; or (3) decreased frequency of bowel movements.

There is also no specific definition for pediatric constipation. From the perspective of modern medicine, children with constipation may experience fewer bowel

Table 1 Characteristics of normal stool in Iranian traditional medicine^[12,19]

Feature	Definition of traditional medicine
Appearance	Homogeneous and condense
Color	Yellowish (In the condition that any chromatic substance is not taken before)
Consistency	Neither very dense nor so diluted (something like honey)
Frequency	Once per meal
Amount	Proportionate to the intake, mean in amount
Smell	Neither smelly nor odorless
Passing	Voluntary, without difficulty, pain or anal irritation
Bowel sounds	None
Foam	None
After defecation	A feeling of lightness in the body

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