

Massage Acupuncture, Moxibustion, and Other Forms of Complementary and Alternative Medicine in Inflammatory Bowel Disease

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KEYWORDS

- Crohn disease • Ulcerative colitis • Massage • Acupuncture • Moxibustion
- Complementary and alternative therapy

KEY POINTS

- Complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) therapy is frequently used by patients with inflammatory bowel disease (IBD).
- Massage therapy, acupuncture, and moxibustion therapy are some of the most commonly used CAMs by IBD patients who use CAM.
- Massage therapy, although it may provide benefit in other medical conditions, is poorly studied in the IBD patient population.
- Acupuncture and moxibustion therapy when used alone or in combination have shown to improve inflammation and symptoms in animal and human studies.
- Current clinical trials of acupuncture and moxibustion, although encouraging, are insufficient to recommend these therapies as alternatives to conventional IBD therapies.

MESSAGE, ACUPUNCTURE, MOXIBUSTION, AND OTHER FORMS OF COMPLEMENTARY AND ALTERNATIVE MEDICINE IN INFLAMMATORY BOWEL DISEASE

Complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) comprises an assorted group of nonconventional medical and health care systems, practices, and products. Complementary medicine is defined as use of nonconventional treatments together with conventional medicines. In contrast, alternative therapy is defined as nonconventional treatments used instead of conventional medicines. CAM can include herbal therapy,

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probiotics and prebiotics, dietary supplements, dietary practices, mind-body practices, and spiritual healing. Many of these practices have been used for many years and have more recently gained traction in westernized medicine.

CAMs are used frequently by inflammatory bowel disease (IBD) patients.^{1,2} Patients often do not reveal the use of CAM to their treating physicians and, even more concerning, they may be less compliant with their conventional therapy because of CAM usage.^{3–5} On the physician side of the problem, physician understanding of what and how CAM works is often extremely limited. Physicians may be quick to discount or disregard a patient's use of CAM as inconsequential, an attitude that can strain the physician-patient relationship.

Some of the most commonly CAMs used by IBD patients center around mind-body techniques such as massage, acupuncture, and moxibustion.^{1,6–8} Because acupuncture and moxibustion are relatively new to western society, most physicians are unaware of what exactly is involved with these therapies. Given that these therapies are being used with increasing frequency within the IBD patient population, this review is undertaken with the purpose of familiarizing physicians with massage, acupuncture, and moxibustion. It is hoped that gaining a better understanding of these therapies will assist in avoiding any additional strain on the physician-patient relationship.

Massage Therapy

Massage therapy involves applying pressure on the joints and muscles of the body in a variety of ways. Pressure is most commonly applied with the hands, but knees, feet, and elbows are sometimes used. A massage can be applied with a device that may or may not vibrate. Commonly, the patient is in the prone or supine position on a specially designed massage table. Massage is possibly among the oldest CAMs, with evidence of it being used in ancient Greece, China, Italy, and Japan, and by Native Americans. Massage has been reported to benefit all sorts of medical conditions, but is it most commonly used for sports-related and muscle-related injuries.⁹ Many studies have reported benefit in a variety of conditions, including pain, depression, and anxiety.¹⁰ Massage therapy does require specific training and it is regulated in some form by 44 states, which does provide some consistency across providers, as well as safety assurances.

For these reasons, it is no surprise that a Swedish study reported that 20% of IBD subjects who use CAMs used massage.¹¹ Another study from Manitoba, Canada, reported that 30% of CAM-using IBD subjects used massage and another 14% used chiropractic.⁶ Other trials have reported chiropractor use as high as 40% and massage use at 22% in subjects who used CAM. Despite the high level of utilization of this therapy among IBD subjects, clinical trials evaluating the efficacy of massage therapy in IBD subjects are lacking. This may be a result of the difficulty around appropriate trial design that has hampered massage therapy study in other disease states; in particular, developing a sham massage treatment is very difficult. Any sort of even light touch may be perceived as having a relaxing or calming effect on patients.

Acupuncture and Moxibustion

What is acupuncture?

Acupuncture consists of placing thin needles into the skin at specific locations (acupoints) with the hopes of providing a therapeutic benefit to the patient. There are several variations on this technique, sometime using small electrical currents or in conjunction with heat. This has perhaps been around even longer than massage therapy. It has been used by the Chinese for more than 4000 years and is central to Chinese traditional medicine.¹²

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