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Acupuncture is one of the oldest therapies within Traditional Chinese Medicine, dating back more than 3,000 years. Traditional Chinese Medicine is a “Whole Medical System” that often encompasses herbs, massage, nutrition, energy moving exercises, and acupuncture.

According to Traditional Chinese Medicine, the body is a delicate balance of two opposing and inseparable forces: yin and yang. Yin represents the cold, slow, or passive principle, while yang represents the hot, excited, or active principle. Among the major assumptions in TCM are that health is achieved by maintaining the body in a “balanced state” and that disease is due to an internal imbalance of yin and yang.

Acupuncture stimulates different points on the body which are important for the normal functions of the body and encourages the body to return to homeostasis. These points, called acupoints, are located along the lines connecting different organs, and based on the principles of acupuncture, represent the channels carrying the vital energy (“qi”) through the body. The main goal of acupuncture is to balance, regulate or strengthen a patient’s energy, which is called qi [chee]. Scientists have found that many acupoints overlay with bundles of neurovascular cells, providing supporting evidence to the mechanism by which acupuncture can alleviate pain.

There are different ways to stimulate the acupoints. We intentionally use the term “acupuncture” to acknowledge the multiple ways in which points can be stimulated: acupressure (applying pressure to the acupoints with fingers), Shonishin (a technique in which the practitioner uses small metal shonishin tools to scratch, tap or brush on the child’s skin over acupuncture pathways, this treatment gently relaxes and simulates the child’s body back into balance, or acupuncture (a very thin (as thin as a hair), sterile, single-use needles is inserted into the skin at specific acupoints on the body). We also use the term “acupuncture” given the concern about reactions and negative conditioning to the term “puncture” and the

potential association of an acupuncture needle and treatment being similar to puncture with a hypodermic needle for venipuncture or vaccine administration.

Acupuncture is one form of complementary and integrative health that has a growing evidence base for use among children. There is strong interest in the use of pediatric acupuncture in the US, with evidence for the safety and feasibility of pediatric and adolescent acupuncture as well as acceptability of acupuncture by children. The benefits of acupuncture for children have been well-documented in children experiencing chronic pain as well as chemotherapy-associated nausea/vomiting. A recent pilot study by Leung, et.al., demonstrated that acupuncture was well tolerated by a small pediatric population with anxiety and showed a significant reduction in anxiety scores. Research is ongoing to assess the benefits of acupuncture beyond pain management. Some studies relevant to IBD reported that acupuncture and moxibustion improved GI symptoms, including: abdominal pain, diarrhea, constipation, gas, bloating, and nausea, as well as alleviating inflammation.

Acupuncture can be a safe, cost-effective, noninvasive, and nonpharmacological option as adjunctive therapy for managing disease activity and reducing symptoms. If you choose to try acupuncture, make sure to work with a provider who is familiar with the medicines you are taking and can work together with your medical team.