



10.22034/JAPB.2025.174

Foeniculum vulgare in Pediatric Gastrointestinal Health from Herbal Traditions to Advances in Molecular Medicine

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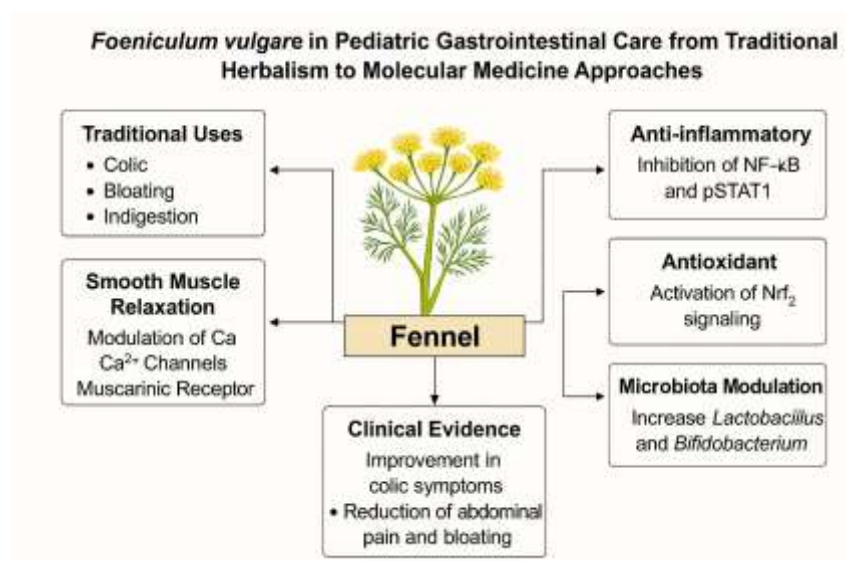
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Article Received: 5 Nov.2025, Revised: 7 Dec.2025, Accepted: 31 Dec.2025

Abstract

Background: Herbal medicine plays an essential role in global healthcare, especially for pediatric populations where conventional pharmacological treatments may carry safety concerns. *Foeniculum vulgare* (fennel), a staple in traditional Persian and Greco-Arabic medicine, is increasingly recognized for its therapeutic role in managing gastrointestinal (GI) disorders in children. **Objective:** This review synthesizes traditional uses with contemporary molecular evidence to explore fennel's potential in pediatric GI care. **Methods:** A comprehensive analysis of *F. vulgare*'s phytochemical profile and molecular mechanisms, including anti-inflammatory, spasmolytic, antioxidant, and microbiota-modulating actions, is presented, alongside its formulation strategies and clinical relevance. **Results:** Anethole, fenchone, limonene, and flavonoids underpin fennel's multi-target effects by modulating inflammatory pathways (e.g., NF- κ B, pSTAT1), strengthening intestinal barrier proteins (e.g., claudin-1, occludin), regulating gut motility, and promoting beneficial microbiota (e.g., *Lactobacillus*, *Bifidobacterium*). These actions align with the pathophysiology of pediatric disorders such as colic, abdominal pain, and diarrhea. **Conclusion:** *F. vulgare* offers a well-tolerated, mechanistically diverse phytotherapeutic option for pediatric GI disorders. Future standardization, safety evaluations, and clinical studies are warranted to enable its evidence-based integration into pediatric healthcare.

Keywords: *Foeniculum vulgare*, pediatric gastroenterology, phytotherapy, fennel, gut inflammation, microbiota, herbal medicine



Graphical Abstract – Integrated Molecular Actions of *Foeniculum vulgare* in Pediatric Gut Health. This graphical abstract depicts the multi-targeted molecular interactions of *Foeniculum vulgare* in the pediatric gastrointestinal system. Key phytochemicals, such as anethole, fenchone, limonene, flavonoids, and phenolic acids—act synergistically by downregulating inflammatory pathways (e.g., NF- κ B, pSTAT1), enhancing tight junction integrity (occludin, claudin-1, ZO-1), and activating antioxidant enzymes (SOD, CAT, GPx), thereby strengthening the epithelial barrier and reducing mucosal inflammation. Simultaneously, modulation of calcium channels and muscarinic receptors leads to intestinal smooth muscle relaxation and reduced spasms. Antimicrobial components suppress pathogenic bacteria (*E. coli*, *Clostridium spp.*) while promoting beneficial microbes (*Lactobacillus*, *Bifidobacterium*), supporting microbiota balance and gut resilience. These interconnected actions support fennel's safety and effectiveness in managing pediatric disorders such as colic, functional abdominal pain, and diarrhea.

1. Introduction

Herbal medicine remains one of the oldest and most accessible healthcare modalities globally, especially in regions with limited access to conventional

pharmacotherapies. The World Health Organization estimates that up to 80% of the global population relies on herbal treatments as part of primary care (1). A prominent example of this enduring practice is *Foeniculum vulgare* (fennel), widely used in both

traditional and modern contexts for digestive ailments (2, 3).

This review explores fennel’s role in addressing pediatric gastrointestinal (GI) disorders, one of the most prevalent and therapeutically challenging groups of conditions in children (4). Given the limitations and safety issues associated with conventional treatments, especially in infants and toddlers (5), this paper synthesizes traditional uses with recent molecular evidence supporting fennel’s clinical integration.

1.1. Herbal Medicine in Global Health: Tradition Reinvented

Herbal medicine constitutes one of the oldest and most widely practiced forms of healthcare in human history, with documented use spanning thousands of years across civilizations (2). Today, it remains an integral part of primary healthcare for approximately 80% of the world’s population (1), particularly in regions of Asia, Africa, and Latin America, according to the World Health Organization. Even in industrialized nations, there is a growing shift toward plant-based therapies, driven by concerns over synthetic drug side effects, antibiotic resistance, and the rising burden of chronic, lifestyle-related diseases. Advances in pharmacognosy, phytochemistry, and molecular biology have further validated the pharmacological potential of medicinal plants (6), paving the way for evidence-based integration of traditional remedies into modern medical systems.

1.2. Pediatric GI Disorders: A Clinical and Public Health Challenge

Gastrointestinal (GI) disorders in children are among the most frequent concerns in both outpatient pediatric care and parental self-management. Conditions such as infantile colic, functional abdominal pain, gastroesophageal reflux, constipation, and acute diarrhea affect a substantial portion of the pediatric population worldwide (4). These disorders are not only physically distressing for the child but also emotionally and economically burdensome for families and healthcare systems. Contributing factors include immature enteric

physiology, developing gut microbiota, heightened visceral sensitivity, and a still-maturing gut–brain axis. Standard pharmacologic treatments may offer only partial relief and are often associated with safety concerns, especially in infants and toddlers (5). This therapeutic gap has driven increasing attention toward gentle, plant-based interventions that are better suited to the sensitivities of the pediatric gastrointestinal tract.

1.3. A Multifunctional Herbal Ally for Pediatric Digestion

Within this context, fennel emerges as one of the most widely used and scientifically investigated medicinal plants for pediatric GI care. Deeply rooted in the traditions of Persian, Greco-Arabic, and European herbal medicine, fennel has long been used to relieve infantile colic, flatulence, and digestive discomfort (2, 3). Its therapeutic actions are attributed to bioactive compounds such as anethole, fenchone, estragole, and various phenolic antioxidants. Modern studies have elucidated multiple molecular mechanisms underlying fennel’s effects, suppression of intestinal inflammation via downregulation of pSTAT1 signaling (7), enhancement of epithelial barrier integrity through tight junction protein modulation (7, 15), calcium channel-dependent smooth muscle relaxation (8, 16), and potential modulation of gut microbiota and neuroenteric signaling (9). These findings align closely with its traditional indications, supporting fennel as a promising integrative tool in managing pediatric GI disorders (10).

2. Bioactive Compounds and Their Digestive Relevance

Foeniculum vulgare owes its therapeutic versatility to a rich array of bioactive phytochemicals, which include volatile oils, phenolic compounds, flavonoids, and terpenoids (2, 12). (Table 1).

These compounds are distributed across seeds, essential oil, and aqueous extracts, with anethole typically comprising up to 80% of the essential oil fraction (2).

Table 1. Key Bioactive Constituents and Their Functions

Compound	Class	Digestive Role	Reference
Anethole	Volatile oil (phenylpropanoid)	Relaxes smooth muscle via calcium channel modulation; reduces gas and cramping	2, 17
Fenchone	Monoterpene ketone	Enhances bile flow and digestion; contributes to antimicrobial activity	7, 9
Estragole	Volatile oil	Mild spasmolytic and aromatic; enhances palatability and GI motility	7
Limonene	Monoterpene	Antioxidant and anti-inflammatory; modulates gut microbiota	12, 14
Quercetin, Kaempferol	Flavonoids	Potent antioxidants; reduce oxidative stress in gut mucosa	12, 26
Chlorogenic acids	Phenolic acids	Support mucosal healing and modulate gut inflammation	12, 28
Tannins	Polyphenols	Astringent; useful in diarrhea and mucosal protection	7
Phytosterols	Plant sterols	May support gut barrier integrity and reduce inflammation	7

2.1. Extraction and Bioaccessibility

Aqueous and methanolic extracts retain high levels of polyphenols and flavonoids, especially when processed using pressurized liquid extraction or encapsulated in acid-resistant capsules to improve bioavailability during

digestion (32). This is particularly relevant for pediatric formulations.

3. Molecular Mechanisms of *Foeniculum vulgare* in Pediatric Gastrointestinal Disorders

The therapeutic efficacy of *Foeniculum vulgare* in pediatric GI disorders is underpinned by a diverse array

of bioactive compounds acting on multiple molecular targets (2, 3, 12).

3.1. Anti-inflammatory Signaling Modulation

Anethole downregulates TLR4/TLR5–MyD88–NF- κ B signaling, reducing IL-1 β , TNF- α , and IL-6 in intestinal epithelial cells (11, 23). It also inhibits phosphorylated STAT1 (pSTAT1) in colonic epithelial cells and murine colitis models (7). Fenchone and limonene suppress COX-2 and iNOS expression and reduce leukocyte infiltration (12, 24).

3.2. Enhancement of Intestinal Barrier Integrity

Fennel extracts and anethole upregulate occludin, claudin-1, and ZO-1, improving TEER and reducing permeability (7, 15, 25). Anethole and limonene restore barrier function in ETEC- and DSS-induced damage models (7, 26).

3.3. Spasmolytic and Motility-Regulating Effects

Anethole and fenchone inhibit voltage-gated calcium channels and antagonize muscarinic (M3) receptors, producing dose-dependent smooth muscle relaxation (8, 16, 27). These effects are highly relevant to infantile colic and functional abdominal pain. (10, 17, 18).

3.4. Antioxidant and Cytoprotective Activity

Flavonoids and phenolic acids scavenge ROS and upregulate SOD, CAT, and GPx via Nrf2/ARE activation (13, 14, 28). Chlorogenic acids reduce lipid peroxidation and protect enterocytes (14, 29).

3.5. Microbiota Modulation and Antimicrobial Effects

Fennel's essential oils exhibit broad-spectrum antimicrobial activity, reducing pathogenic bacteria (e.g., *E. coli*, *Clostridium spp.*) while supporting beneficial flora. Anethole has been shown to enrich *Lactobacillus* and *Bifidobacterium* populations in animal models, suggesting a prebiotic-like effect that may benefit pediatric gut health (9, 19, 30). Polyphenols and anethole increase short-chain fatty acid production and enrich beneficial taxa (9, 31).

3.6. Pediatric Implications

These molecular mechanisms directly address the pathophysiology of common pediatric GI disorders such as, Colic: smooth muscle relaxation and anti-inflammatory effects (10, 17), Functional abdominal pain: cytokine suppression and visceral hypersensitivity reduction (7, 18), and diarrhea and dysbiosis: barrier protection and microbiota regulation (7, 9, 19).

4. Interconnected Roles in Fennel's Molecular Pathway

The bioactive compounds in *Foeniculum vulgare* interact through interlinked molecular and cellular pathways, producing complementary effects on the pediatric gastrointestinal (GI) system. Their coordinated actions unfold in the following logical cascade (Fig. 2):

4.1. Initial Modulation of Inflammation and Oxidative Stress

Anethole, limonene, and chlorogenic acids quickly modulate inflammatory signaling by inhibiting key

transcription factors like NF- κ B and pSTAT1. This leads to suppression of IL-1 β , IL-6, and TNF- α , proinflammatory cytokines that contribute to visceral pain, epithelial irritation, and barrier dysfunction (7, 11). Simultaneously, flavonoids and chlorogenic acids upregulate antioxidant defense enzymes (SOD, CAT, GPx), reducing oxidative stress and preserving intracellular signaling fidelity (13, 14).

4.2. Restoration of Epithelial Barrier Function

Reduced inflammation allows tight junction proteins (e.g., claudin-1, ZO-1, occludin) to be upregulated, either directly via anethole and chlorogenic acids, or indirectly through decreased cytokine load (7, 15). This enhances transepithelial electrical resistance (TEER) and limits paracellular permeability, a crucial benefit in children with GI immaturity or infection-prone guts (7).

4.3. Neuromuscular and Motility Adjustments

With inflammation dampened and the barrier intact, anethole and fenchone act on smooth muscle calcium channels and muscarinic receptors, reducing spasms and supporting normalized motility. This is especially useful in colic, where gut hypercontractility is a hallmark (8, 16). These compounds also reduce afferent signaling from the enteric nervous system (ENS) to the central nervous system, lowering pain sensitivity, possibly through indirect interaction with serotonergic or GABAergic tone (18).

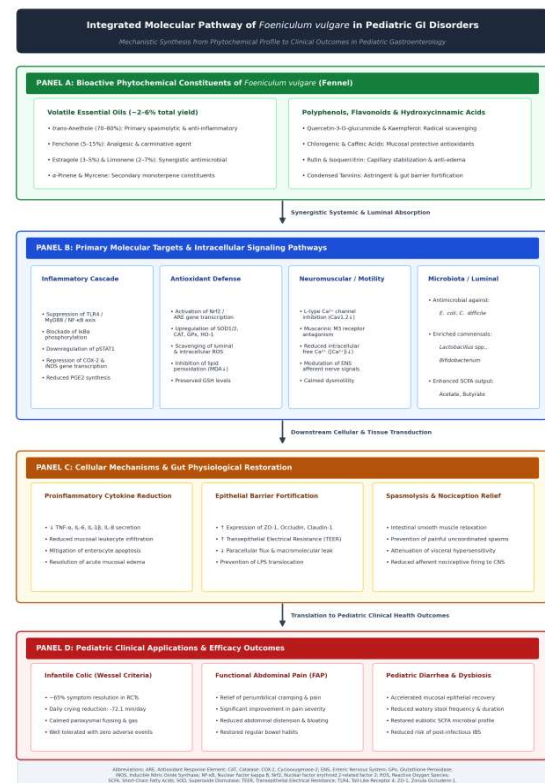


Figure 1. Integrated Molecular Pathway of *Foeniculum vulgare* in Pediatric Gastrointestinal Disorders. This schematic illustrates the coordinated molecular interactions by which key phytochemicals in *Foeniculum vulgare*, including anethole, fenchone, estragole, limonene, flavonoids, and chlorogenic acids, exert therapeutic effects on the pediatric gastrointestinal tract.

Upon administration, fennel's volatile oils (e.g., anethole, fenchone) modulate intestinal motility by inhibiting smooth muscle calcium channels and

muscarinic receptors, thereby reducing spasms and visceral pain (8, 16). In parallel, anethole and limonene suppress inflammatory mediators via the downregulation of NF- κ B and pSTAT1 signaling, leading to decreased expression of proinflammatory cytokines (TNF- α , IL-6, IL-1 β) (7, 11). This anti-inflammatory effect facilitates the restoration of epithelial barrier integrity through upregulation of tight junction proteins (e.g., ZO-1, occludin, claudin-1), enhanced further by the antioxidant action of flavonoids and chlorogenic acids via activation of the Nrf2 pathway and endogenous enzymes (SOD, CAT, GPx) (7, 13, 14).

Additionally, fennel's antimicrobial compounds selectively suppress pathogenic bacteria (e.g., *E. coli*, *Clostridium spp.*) while promoting beneficial gut flora, contributing to microbiota homeostasis (9, 19). These interconnected actions, spanning neuromuscular, epithelial, immune, and microbial pathways, collectively alleviate symptoms associated with common pediatric GI disorders such as colic, functional abdominal pain, and diarrhea, while supporting intestinal resilience and developmental gut health (10, 17, 18).

4.4. Microbial Equilibrium and Feedback

The improved gut environment (less inflammation, more integrity) allows beneficial bacteria like *Lactobacillus* and *Bifidobacterium* to thrive an effect supported directly by anethole and limonene's antimicrobial action against pathogenic species (9, 19). This shift in microbiota composition further reduces toxin production, cytokine stimulation, and mucosal damage, creating a feedback loop that stabilizes gut function and immune signaling in pediatric patients (9).

5. Clinical Trial Evidence

Recent scientific studies strongly support the therapeutic potential of *Foeniculum vulgare* in managing pediatric gastrointestinal disorders, aligning traditional uses with modern biomedical insights. For infantile colic, multiple randomized controlled trials (RCTs) and systematic reviews demonstrate consistent efficacy. A landmark RCT by Weizman et al. (2003) evaluated fennel seed oil emulsion in 121 infants, showing colic resolution in 65% of the treatment group versus 23.7% in placebo ($P < 0.01$; absolute risk reduction 41%, number needed to treat 2) (10). Similarly, an earlier double-blind trial of a herbal tea containing fennel, chamomile, and verbena in 68 infants reported colic elimination in 57% versus 26% with placebo ($P < 0.01$) (25).

A multi-herb extract (ColiMil, including fennel, chamomile, and lemon balm) was tested in a double-blind RCT of 93 breastfed colicky infants, reducing daily crying time from 201.2 min to 76.9 min in the treatment group (62% reduction) versus 198.7 min to 169.9 min in placebo (14% reduction; $P < 0.005$), with response rates of 85.4% versus 48.9% ($P < 0.005$) and no adverse effects. (23) A real-world retrospective survey of 148 parents using a commercial fennel-based syrup (BabyCalm) reported rapid symptom reduction in 92% of cases, with 85% noting decreased crying within 48 hours and high satisfaction (mean score 8.7/10) (33).

Systematic evidence further corroborates these findings. A 2016 meta-analysis of three RCTs on fennel

preparations (n=220 infants) found a significant mean reduction in crying time of -72.1 min/day (95% CI -126.4 to -17.7; $P < 0.001$) at day 21, positioning fennel as an effective option alongside probiotics (24). Another systematic review of herbal interventions for pediatric GI disorders identified promising evidence for fennel-based preparations in colic, with reductions in crying episodes and duration across multiple trials (34).

For functional abdominal pain (FAP) and diarrhea, evidence is emerging but less robust. A 2022 narrative review highlighted fennel's role in multi-herb formulations for FAP, noting symptom relief via antispasmodic and anti-inflammatory effects, though pediatric-specific RCTs are limited (35). In diarrhea, fennel contributes to astringent and microbiota-modulating effects in combination therapies, with one review noting efficacy in reducing stool frequency when combined with other herbs like *Potentilla erecta* (34). No serious adverse events were reported across trials, underscoring fennel's tolerability, though monitoring for rare allergic reactions is advised (36). These cumulative findings reinforce fennel's value as a multitarget, well-tolerated phytotherapeutic agent in pediatric GI care, warranting further pediatric-specific trials and pharmacokinetic studies to support standardization and clinical adoption.

6. Discussion

This review underscores the therapeutic relevance of *Foeniculum vulgare* in pediatric gastrointestinal (GI) care, bridging traditional herbal practices with contemporary biomedical insights. Historically used across Persian, Greco-Arabic, and European systems, fennel has long been valued for its digestive benefits (2, 3). Recent pharmacological studies now validate these uses, revealing a complex interplay of bioactive compounds and molecular mechanisms (12).

The plant's volatile oils, particularly anethole, fenchone, and limonene, exert spasmolytic effects by modulating calcium channels and muscarinic receptors, offering relief in conditions like infantile colic and functional abdominal pain (8, 9, 16). Anti-inflammatory actions are mediated through downregulation of NF- κ B and pSTAT1 pathways, leading to reduced expression of IL-1 β , IL-6, and TNF- α (7, 11). These effects are complemented by the upregulation of tight junction proteins (e.g., occludin, claudin-1, ZO-1), which enhance epithelial barrier integrity, an essential factor in pediatric gut health (7, 15).

Antioxidant constituents such as quercetin and chlorogenic acids activate Nrf2 signaling and endogenous enzymes (SOD, CAT, GPx), mitigating oxidative stress and supporting mucosal resilience (13, 14). Additionally, fennel's antimicrobial and prebiotic-like effects, particularly its ability to suppress pathogenic bacteria while promoting *Lactobacillus* and *Bifidobacterium*, contribute to microbiota balance and immune modulation (6, 19).

These multifaceted actions make fennel a promising candidate for integrative pediatric GI therapy. However, formulation strategies (e.g., pressurized liquid extraction, acid-resistant encapsulation) and safety

considerations, especially regarding estragole content, must be addressed (32). Future research should focus on pediatric pharmacokinetics, long-term safety, and microbiome interactions to support clinical translation.

7. Conclusion

Foeniculum vulgare presents a compelling case for integration into pediatric GI care, offering a multitargeted, gentle, and culturally resonant alternative to conventional therapies. Its bioactive compounds act synergistically to reduce inflammation, restore barrier function, regulate motility, and support microbial balance addressing key aspects of pediatric GI pathophysiology. Given its historical use, emerging scientific validation, and compatibility with pediatric physiology, fennel holds strong potential as a safe and effective adjunct in holistic digestive care. Continued research and standardization will be essential to fully realize its role in evidence-based pediatric practice.

Acknowledgement

The authors acknowledge the support of Gemini Notebook of Google in assisting with the conceptual design and visualization of the molecular pathway figure.

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Integrated Molecular Pathway of *Foeniculum vulgare* in Pediatric GI Disorders
Mechanistic Synthesis from Phytochemical Profile to Clinical Outcomes in Pediatric Gastroenterology

PANEL A: Bioactive Phytochemical Constituents of *Foeniculum vulgare* (Fennel)

- **Volatile Essential Oils (~2-6% total yield)**
- **trans-Anethole (70-80%):** Primary spasmolytic & anti-inflammatory
- **Fenchone (5-15%):** Analgesic & carminative agent
- **Estragole (3-5%) & Limonene (2-7%):** Synergistic antimicrobial
- **α -Pinene & Myrcene:** Secondary monoterpene constituents

- **Polyphenols, Flavonoids & Hydroxycinnamic Acids**
- Quercetin-3-O-glucuronide & Kaempferol: Radical scavenging
- Chlorogenic & Caffeic Acids: Mucosal protective antioxidants
- Rutin & Isoquercitrin: Capillary stabilization & anti-edema
- Condensed Tannins: Astringent & gut barrier fortification

PANEL B: Primary Molecular Targets & Intracellular Signaling Pathways

Inflammatory Cascade

- Suppression of TLR4 / MyD88 / NF- κ B axis
- Stockade of I κ B α phosphorylation
- Downregulation of pSTAT1
- Repression of COX-2 & iNOS gene transcription
- Reduced PGE2 synthesis

Antioxidant Defense

- Activation of NF κ B / ARE gene transcription
- Upregulation of SOD1/2, CAT, GPx, HO-1
- Scavenging of luminal & intracellular ROS
- Inhibition of lipid peroxidation (MDA $\downarrow$)
- Preserved GSH levels

Neuromuscular / Motility

- L-type Ca^{2+} channel inhibition (Cav1.2 ↓)
- Muscarinic M3 receptor antagonism
- Reduced intracellular free Ca^{2+} ($[\text{Ca}^{2+}]_i$ ↓)
- Modulation of ENS afferent nerve signals
- Calmed dysmotility

- Antimicrobial against:
E. coli, *C. difficile*
- Enriched commensals:
Lactobacillus spp.,
Bifidobacterium
- Enhanced SCFA output:
Acetate, Butyrate

PANEL C: Cellular Mechanisms & Gut Physiological Restoration

Proinflammatory Cytokine Reduction

- ↓ TNF- α , IL-6, IL-1 β , IL-8 secretion
- Reduced mucosal leukocyte infiltration
- Mitigation of enterocyte apoptosis
- Resolution of acute mucosal edema

Epithelial Barrier Fortification

- ↑ Expression of ZO-1, Occludin, Claudin-1
- ↑ Transepithelial Electrical Resistance (TEER)
- ↓ Paracellular flux & macromolecular leak
- Prevention of LPS translocation

- Intestinal smooth muscle relaxation
- Prevention of painful uncoordinated spasms
- Attenuation of visceral hypersensitivity
- Reduced afferent nociceptive firing to CNS

PANEL D: Pediatric Clinical Applications & Efficacy Outcomes

- -65% symptom resolution in RCTs
- Daily crying reduction: -72.1 min/day
- Calmed paroxysmal fussing & gas
- Well tolerated with zero adverse events

- Relief of periumbilical cramping & pain
- Significant improvement in pain severity
- Reduced abdominal distension & bloating
- Restored regular bowel habits

Pediatric Diarrhea & Dysbiosis

- Accelerated mucosal epithelial recovery
- Reduced watery stool frequency & duration
- Restored subotic SCFA microbial profile
- Reduced risk of post-infectious IBS

Abbreviations: ARE, Antioxidant Response Element; CAT, Catalase; COX 2, Cyclooxygenase-2; EMS, Enteric Nervous System; GPs, Glutathione Peroxidase; iNOS, Inducible Nitric Oxide Synthase; NF- κ B, Nuclear factor kappa B; NF2, Nuclear factor erythroid 2-related factor 2; ROS, Reactive Oxygen Species; SCFA, Short-Chain Fatty Acids; SOD, Superoxide Dismutase; TSEF, Transepithelial Electrical Resistance; TLR4, Toll-Like Receptor 4; ZO-1, Zonula Occludens-1.