

December 9, 2004

Suction-cup therapy

It might sound painful, but this old technique relieves pain for some.

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When Linda Jones first started working at Dr. Young Park's integrative medicine practice, she dubbed his methods "barbaric."

"I told him, I have a new name for your practice: 'The Little Shop of Horrors,' " Jones said. "I don't think he liked that much."

When Park offered to help Jones, who'd been enduring the excruciating, chronic pain of fibromyalgia for more than a year, the 40-year-old medical assistant politely declined.

Despite trying several therapies and a host of different drugs, nothing seemed to help. She rarely slept through the night, as her muscles seemed to scream in agony, and she was constantly fatigued.

After a year and a half of having X-rays, MRIs and paying \$6,000 out-of-pocket for medical tests and expenses, Jones gave in.

"I finally said, go ahead and do whatever."

IN THE BLOOD

In February, Dr. Park began giving Jones monthly wet and dry cupping treatments, a practice that basically draws nutrient-rich blood into the cups through a vacuum effect. The increased circulation then stimulates the body's natural healing systems.

Dr. Park touts he is the only physician in the Midwest who performs wet cupping, where "stagnated" blood is drawn out of the skin, drawing more nutrients to the area.

A QUICK LESSON ON CUPPING

In dry cupping, skin is suctioned into a cup or glass by igniting a small amount of alcohol to the cups and quickly applying them to the skin.

Wet cupping involves puncturing the skin first and creating a suction through lighting a piece of paper before covering it with a glass.

A Roman physician spoke of cupping in his first-century book of medicine, suggesting wet cupping for removing gases and wastes under the skin, and dry cupping for removing wastes from the internal organs, for general health maintenance and common ailments like a cold.

For wet cupping treatments, Park begins by pricking patients with a small needle, the kind used to check blood sugar in diabetics. He works quickly, crisscrossing the area to be treated before lighting an alcohol-dipped piece of paper, throwing it into the cup and pressing down to form a seal. Skin is sucked up into a clear, cylindrical glass cup that looks much like the beakers used in high school chemistry class. Blood begins to trickle out as Park sets to work on the next site. Sometimes Park applies several dry cups, smaller ceramic pots that suction skin but don't collect blood around the area as well.

It looks like it might hurt, as bulbs of flesh are suctioned into the glasses, but Park is adamant that it doesn't. If you've ever played with a vacuum cleaner (and who hasn't?) you can get an idea of what it feels like.

"It gets your attention at first," one patient said, "but after 15 to 20 seconds, it eases off."

ANCIENT PRACTICE

Cupping has been around for centuries and is a fairly common practice throughout Asia and Europe, but it hadn't garnered much attention in the United States until Gwyneth Paltrow mystified the media when she turned up for the "Anchorman" premiere with small, circular bruises across her back -- the results of cupping. British actress Kate Winslet took a cue from Paltrow and decided to try the treatment after straining her neck.

"Koreans use it more often than any other country," said Park, who boasts his California-based father performs more wet cupping treatments than anyone in the country.

According to Park, who's trained in both Eastern and Western medicine, both variations of cupping are effective at treating a variety of conditions, from diabetes and high blood pressure to carpal tunnel syndrome. Park has about a hundred different sized cups and glasses designed to fit any part of the body, including fingers, noses and elbows.

Dry cupping pulls out toxins by expanding the pores and is better for

END YOUR MISERY

Here are some of the conditions and disorders that Dr. Park says can be treated by cupping:

- Abdominal pains
- Allergies
- Anemia
- Animal bites
- Arthritis
- Asthma
- Back pain, upper and lower
- Bladder problems
- Chronic headaches
- Common cold
- Constipation
- Diabetes
- Diarrhea
- Fatigue and depression
- Heart disease
- Hemorrhoids
- Hives
- Hypertension
- Joint pains
- Kidney disease
- Lung disease
- Menstrual irregularity
- Migraine headaches
- Rashes
- Shoulder pain
- Skin difficulties, including skin cancer
- Stomach disorders

*Source: Dr. Young Park

treating whole-body conditions affected by a poor immunity and circulation, as well as chronic illnesses like diabetes and high blood pressure, Park said. Wet cupping directly removes congested or stagnated blood and improves blood flow to the area, stimulating the body's own healing mechanisms, making it better, according to Park, for treating musculoskeletal conditions and neurological disorders.

DOES IT WORK?

There are few books on the technique, and those that are in print are written in Korean. But Park hopes to write a book to help teach English-speaking patients and doctors about the technique. Although he grew up with a father who'd been trained in acupuncture and traditional Eastern medicine, Park has come up with Western ways of explaining why cupping works.

He explained the difference in rates of glucose converted to ATP in aerobic and anaerobic states, and the buildup of lactic acid (what causes pain) when there's not enough ATP. In the end, it boils down to removing wastes from the body and improving circulation.

"Some patients experience an immediate relief of pain after the first treatment," Park said. "Sometimes it takes a couple of treatments."

For Jones, cupping has been almost like a miracle cure.

"It's incredible," Jones said. "After the fifth treatment, I began noticing significant relief."

"Dr. Park says if I do this for a year, I will never have to utter the word fibromyalgia again."