

Cupping Therapy by Ellen J. Lord

Cupping is an ancient technique of applying heated vessels to the skin. Believed to cure internal disorders, it was commonly used by the indigenous peoples of the Americas and Africa, as well as by traditional Asian healers. The Chinese applied hollowed-out animal horns to the skin, sucked the air out of the horn and then blocked the opening with one finger.

The age-old technique had been rediscovered in the twentieth century. Today, small vessels made of glass, metal or wood are warmed, and the vessel opening is placed against specific skin zones - *reflex zones* - usually on the back, abdomen or legs. Stimulating these zones by drawing blood flow to them in turn stimulates the tissues and internal organs to which the zones are believed to correspond. Also, the cups create minor bruising; this triggers the immune system, which must respond to the "injury." Thus, localized blood-flow stimulation. There are two types of cupping - bloody and dry - used to attain results.

Cupping Glasses

Cupping glasses are bell shaped with openings about 1 - 2½ inches across. Before applying to the skin, the therapist dips a burning cotton ball in alcohol and briefly holds it in the cupping glass. When the glass is applied to the skin, the warmed air inside quickly cools and contracts, creating a vacuum that causes the glass to adhere to the skin by suction. In bloody cupping, the skin is scratched with a sterilized lancet before the cups are applied.

The Treatment

The therapist palpates the patient's back to find any hardening or swelling, and then applies up to 12 cupping glasses to those places. Cupping is usually done to the left and right of the spine, but painful joints or muscle hardening in other parts of the body, such as the abdomen or the legs, can also be treated with cupping. The cupping glasses remain on the skin for 10-15 minutes. Health insurance plans do not cover the cost of cupping treatment.

The Effect

Cupping draws blood to the surface area of the body where the cups are applied. This increased blood flow relieves muscle cramping, hardening of tissue and associated pain. Because specific reflex zones on the back, abdomen and legs correspond to organs, cupping can be used to promote the workings of, say, the kidneys, gallbladder, liver or lungs. Cupping can also mobilize the immune system. The treatment creates temporary, localized bruises, which - like all bruises - activate the body's defensive cells to heal the bruised area. Dry cupping is primarily used for people with a weak constitution and low blood pressure; it is never for patients with high blood pressure. Bloody cupping helps clear the body of accumulated irritants that cause inflammation.

The viewpoint of mainstream medicine

As modern medicine developed, ancient techniques like cupping tended to be considered primitive. Today, however, cupping's effectiveness in relieving muscle cramps and providing supportive therapy for treatment of such disease as asthma is not disputed.

Note: Cupping should be done only by experienced therapists, because improper application might worsen your symptoms. If you are using anticoagulants, sometimes called blood thinners, let your practitioner know before treatment. Cupping can cause excessive bleeding in people on this medication.

Methods of Administration

- **Dry or bloody cupping?**

If body areas are hardened and have poor circulation, the therapist will choose dry cupping, in order to

attract blood flow to those areas. Circular bruises will usually result in such cases, but they will heal within a week. If the problem areas are swollen with excessive blood flow, the therapist will choose bloody cupping. Under certain circumstances in bloody cupping, the therapist will repeat cupping in the same place, applying a new glass several times in succession until all the accumulated blood has been removed.

- **Using acupuncture meridians**

A therapist sometimes applies the principles of acupuncture to achieve an overall strengthening of the body. According to these principles, the bladder meridian runs about 1½ inch to the side of the spine. Located on it are the influence points for all internal organs, and these points can be stimulated by cupping. This stimulation can also help anemic patients.

- **The cupping massage**

In this special form of cupping, the patient's back is rubbed with a special salve that promotes blood flow and makes the skin conductive. The therapist then pulls a large massage cupping glass with a very rounded edge across the back with slow, even movements.

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