Cupping Definition

Cupping therapy is based on the Traditional Chinese Medical (TCM) method of encouraging healing by creating negative pressure via suction. The main purpose is to enhance the circulation of blood and chi or qi.

History

Cupping traces its documented history from TCM dating over 3,000 years ago (though multiple sources affirm that indigenous medicine people/shamans used versions of suction that predate TCM). In addition to Tui Na, Gua sha, acupuncture/acupressure, and herbs, cupping helps comprise the basic TCM approaches to bodywork. Other cultures utilizing cupping include ancient Egyptians, Greeks, and Romans, as supported by archeological texts (both Hippocrates and Galen were proponents of cupping therapy). From the ancient Greeks and Romans, cupping was then passed on to Arabs and Persians and even the prophet Mohammad sanctioned the use of cupping. In western cultures, cupping remained an integral part of conventional, alternative, and folk-based medicine until the early 20th century. An early pioneer of western surgery, Charles Kennedy wrote in 1826, “The art of cupping has been so well-known, and the benefits arising from it so long experienced, that it is quite unnecessary to bring forward testimonials in favor of what has received not only the approbation of modern times, but also the sanction of remotest antiquity.” Interestingly, although cupping fell out of favor in the early 1900s, recent inventions like the modern breast pump evolved from the use of cups for lactation difficulties. The good news is cupping is enjoying a well-deserved resurgence of popularity and likely will continue to for much time to come.

Eastern & Western Theories of Cupping Efficacy

“In every culture and in every medical tradition before ours, healing was accomplished by moving energy.” —Albert Szent-Gyorgyi, Biochemist and Nobel Prize Winner

TCM asserts that the skin is like a fence, and has the ability to breathe, defend, excrete, and regulate body temperature. This fence or force field is known as “wei chi” in TCM and is responsible for encouraging our overall wellness and prevention from
The meridians are the energetic channels that connect the inside of our body (organs, glands, blood, nerves, etc.) with the outside of our body where the acupoints live. Ideally, meridians regulate, balance, and harmonize our body’s Yin Yang forces and are the networks that transport nutrients and energy to our organs. We will be healthy if stagnation from the meridians are removed.

Stagnation may be viewed through a physical lens—such as poor circulation, lymphatic congestion, digestive sluggishness, edema, excess mucus, areas of ischemia, etc. And, stagnation may also be viewed via an energetic perspective: procrastination, rumination, fatigue, depression, etc. Cupping therapy focuses on clearing the following four common categories of stagnation. Blood stagnation includes injuries, adhesions, and menstrual irregularities. Stagnant toxins refers to gastrointestinal disorders, rigid muscles, and breast inflammation. Qi stagnation includes muscular pain, dysmenorrhea, and pinched nerves. And fluid stagnation relates to conditions like lung congestion, asthmas, and lactation dysfunction.

Through cupping on the skin, blood seeps out from the capillaries under the skin and forms discoloration or marks called “sha”. Sha is the toxin and/or metabolic waste that accumulate due to stagnation. The darker the color of the sha, the more stagnation and therefore greater imbalance there is. The sha often presents in a circular shaped skin blemish similar to coloration of a bruise, but this is not in fact what is clinically occurring. A bruise is defined as a”contusion or dark painful area on the skin, where blood has escaped under the skin following a blow”. However, the “cup kiss” is not the result of positive pressure, as in a blow or sudden impact. Rather these areas of sha are the result of negative pressure, which is clinically known as “ecchymosis”.

Ecchymosis is a local leakage of blood into the skin from the capillaries through pulling (as opposed to pushing/pressure) and is painless. The ecchymosis will generally disappear within 3-5 days, though in rare cases of extremely pervasive stagnation, discoloration may last up to two weeks. When practicing cupping therapy, if there’s no pain, there’s no stagnation. And if there’s no stagnation, no pain will present with the treatment.

For those interested in some of the finer points of TCM, it’s important to see the inherent and profound relationship between blood and qi. A common axiom shared among TCM physicians assets: “The blood carries the qi. And the qi moves the blood.” This can be symbolized by imagining a skateboard and its rider as the blood and qi respectively. In this analogy, the blood carries the qi, like the skateboard carries the rider. And the qi moves the blood, as the rider propels the skateboard.” At its simplest, cupping removes sha or stagnation resulting in blood and therefore qi purification.

An excerpt from Zihni Chirali’s book, TCM Cupping Therapy summarizes the idea of blood purification as follows: “Among the general effects, the most important is
the [cupping] effect on the circulatory system. Professor Kentaro Takagi of Nagoya University says that the skin stimulating therapies are significant in that they awaken the greatest responses in the circulatory system. Owing to the pull of low pressure, the flow of blood in the arteries and veins increases, although in the case of the latter, localized spots of congested blood appear and then disappear. It is possible to ease the interruption of blood circulation and congestion and to stop the inflammatory extravasation (escaping bodily fluids such as blood) from the tissues. Therefore, facilitation of the flow of blood is the most important characteristic of this therapy. It is very beneficial for hardened arteries, stiff shoulders, etc.” Taking this one step further, Dr. Katase of Oaska University suggests that cupping may actually influence the composition of blood by increasing red and white blood cells and transforming acidic blood into a more healthy alkaline or neutral pH.

To summarize, cupping creates a vacuum suction and provides negative pressure, sometimes creating changes in skin coloration, or ecchymosis. This process invites blood to flow from as far as 4 inches deep to the skin lifting and drawing circulation from the arteries to the more superficial capillaries, fascial, and meridians. This enhanced circulation distributes greater levels of nutrition, oxygenation, qi flow into the surrounding areas, while simultaneously encouraging detoxification of cellular waste and excess fluid. The founder of Osteopathic Medicine, Andrew Taylor Stills, simply summates healing with this formula: “Circulation is all.”

Cupping Benefits
• Stimulates body’s defense system (TCM calls this “wei chi”)
• Regulates meridian flow
• Improves oxygen supply
• Enhances immune system (lymphatic system)
• Skin warms with increased circulation
• Sedates the nervous system (which makes it an excellent treatment for HBP)
• Relieve back and neck pains,
• Stiff muscles
• Anxiety
• Fatigue
• Migraines
• Rheumatism
• Cellulite
Symptoms Indicated for Cupping

- Muscle spasms, sprains, and strains
- Fibromyalgia
- Migraines and Headaches
- Digestive discomfort
- Fluid retention (edema)
- Detoxing
- Poor circulation
- Cellulite
- Insomnia
- Stress
- Depression
- Decreased energy
- Adrenal fatigue
- Tissue and joint inflammation
- Tired sore and overworked muscles
- Arthritis
- Rheumatism
- Osteoporosis
- Carpel tunnel syndrome
- Back pain
- Sciatica
- Scar tissue
- Stretch marks
- Common cold
- Restless leg syndrome

Systemic Contraindications for Cupping

- Renal failure history
- Cirrhosis
- Uncontrolled high blood pressure
- Clients who are fasting
- Those on blood thinners or have history of thrombosis
- Servere anemia
- Leukemia
- Pregnancy
- Blood disorders
- High fever
Localized Contraindications for Cupping

• Acute Inflammation
• Locations of Hernia/s
• Localized broken skin/open sores
• Dermatitis
• Varicose veins
• Also see joint replacement, broken bones, & surgeries below

Precautions for:

• Wait 9 months after joint replacement surgery on the effected area
• Wait 3 month’s after all other surgeries and/or bone fractures on the effected areas
• Use less strenuous cupping for young and elderly clients, or those in ill health
• No skin exfoliation directly prior to cupping

Considerations:

• Cups will loose suction on hairy, loose, or wrinkly skin, and on boney areas
• If skinny, may not be able to slide, so consider using stationary cups instead
• Avoid excess strenuous activities following treatment
• Drink warm or hot water following treatments for maximized detoxification
• Keep the body warm following the treatments

Potential Negative Reactions

In rare instances, or for those who are in weak health, the following symptoms might occur during or following the cupping service. These might include feeling:

• excessively cold or hot after treatment
• dizzy or faint
• nauseous
• experiencing cold sweats or palpitations

If any of these occur, consider massaging the following points:
*Massage in a counter clockwise direction to help tonify the qi
• Bai Hu (GV 20) located at the superior most, center point on the skull
• Yun Chuen (K1) located on center plantar foot between the ball and arch of the foot
• Nei Guan (PC 6) located 2-3 inches proximal to the anterior wrist crease
• Zhu San Li (ST 36) located 2-3 inches below the inferio-lateral border of patella

Cupping Equipment Options

There are a multitude of materials for cupping. Everything from bamboo, to leeches, to glass jar with a cotton ball dabbed in alcohol and lite on fire may be used for cupping. In a pinch, you might use a small ceramic tea cup, or in more modern times,
cups may be made of plastic or silicone materials, and may have a needle or suction pump and tube attached. For the simplicity of cupping massage, we recommend using pliable silicone cups with a non-drying massage oil to allow for glide.

Approaches to Cupping Massage

The main variables that have the most impact on the results of our cupping depend on how light or deep we create the suction, and whether we utilize movement or pause to rest the cups on specific areas. With silicone cups, the greater the size of the cup or the bigger the squeeze in the cut, the greater the suction and more intense the sensation will be. Moving or pausing with the cups also yield different results.

Sliding Cupping- After applying the cups to the skin, we begin to immediately move the cups in specific directions. This approach enhances the negative pressure effect to generate circulation of blood, lymph and chi, and is very versatile for any massage therapy session.

Stationary Cupping- After applying the cups to the skin, they are kept in place on specific locations for a period of time (generally 5-10 minutes). This approach may result in circulatory coloration of the skin or “ecchymosis” (also clinical expressions are (aka “petechiae” and ”purpura”), which may be confused with bruising, but does not induce bruise-like pain. Consider stationary cupping on relevant acupressure points or areas of adhesion or ischemia only if the client is okay with the appearance of bruising.

Preparations

- Explain to your client what you’re doing and determine if they are concerned about the appearance of circular or other shaped discoloration (aka Petechiae, Purpura, or Ecchymosis)
- Be sure the skin is clean, dry, and free from long hair (interferes with suction)
- Consider warming the cups so they are close to body temperature (on hot cabi)
- Oil generally provides best suction, but if hairy, consider using a cream
- Squeeze the center of the cup to create the desired suction
- Begin with smaller cups and less suction, and progress with client’s feedback
- If you have difficulty moving the cups, consider adding more oil, lifting rather than pressing the cup, or squeeze the cup as you move it
- To disengage, consider leaning and then using a finger to levering off the skin
- Try to create soft hands and make as much contact with your hands on the skin as you move the cups
- Move slowly so client has an opportunity to feel the negative pressure
Cupping Massage Techniques

The Back:

**Bilateral Back Warm-Ups**
Use 2 medium sized cups

Begin with a lunging stance from head of table. Adjust your body mechanics as needed.

**Effleurage Erectors** - Use both cups to travel slowly down both erectors to the sides of the hips, and then travel back up the erectors with both cups. Repeat 3x

**Wing the Back** - Use both cups to travel slowly down both erectors from the neck to the low back moving the cups incrementally from the spine out and back again (lateral to medial) in about 5 horizontal lines up and down. Repeat 3x

**Unilateral Back Approaches**
Use 1 medium-sized cup

**Figure Eights** - Create figure eight or alternating circles around the scapula, then over ribs, then low back and repeat on your way back up the the neck. Start again Repeat 3x

**Glut, Low Back, Rib, & Scap Spirals** - From across the table, create large to smaller circles on the upper hip, lower back, thoracolumbar hinge, and scapular 3x or more.

**Cross-Fiber Friction Erectors** - Travel along the erectors moving medial and lateral, up and down 3x.

**Erector Circles** - Carry cupping circles from hip to shoulder on opposite side of the back. Repeat 3x with focus on areas of Sha, tension or chief complaint.

**Horizontal Jostling** - Shake erectors vigorously medial to lateral from low back to shoulder, 3x or more

**Fish Bite** - Squeeze and release cup as you travel from low back to traps on one side of spine. Repeat 3x or more. *Fish bite is a helpful approach to warming up or cooling down an area.
**Scapular Set-Up:** Lunging stance on same side of table. Begin by sliding client’s arm up along their side body by bending the elbow and resting the hand by the ribs. This will wing out the scapula. Please leave the wrist on the table, not behind the back for safety.

**Follow the Triangle:** Slide cup around scapula 3x. Zig Zag down the rhomboids 3x and then Repeat on opposite side

Repeat all Unilateral Techniques on the Opposite side. Consider placing Stationary Cups on the side you’re not working on for 5-15 minutes.

**Using 1 Large sized cup**

*Zig Zag:* (from head or side of table) Travel in a zig zagging fashion traversing the entire right and left sides of the body across the spine up and down 3x. If client is boney leave out.

**Tonifying Flow:** Lunging stance on either side of table facing head. Slide cup up the center of the spine and then down one side of erectors; repeat sliding up the center of the spine and then down the opposite erector. Repeat series 3x

**Stationary Cups:** Place stationary cup on lateral scapula, rhomboid, trapezius, low back, hip, or focus on any areas of Sha, tension or chief complaint.

*Also, feel free to leave stationary cups on any problem areas at the same time offering relaxation techniques on other areas of body.*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Place a stationary cups on following bilateral points:</th>
<th><strong>Back Shu Points</strong></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>-Metal/Lung Points- on rhomboids in line with superior angle of spine of scapula</td>
<td>Feishu BL-13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-Fire/Heart Points- on rhomboids in line with inferior angle of scapula</td>
<td>Jueyinshu BL-14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-Wood/Liver Points- on erectors just below heart points below scapula</td>
<td>Gnashu BL-18</td>
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<tr>
<td>-Earth/Spleen Points- on erectors at the waist line on or near floating ribs</td>
<td>Pishu BL-20</td>
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<tr>
<td>-Water/Kidney Points- on erectors above iliac crest</td>
<td>Weishu BL-21</td>
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<td>Sanjiaoshu BL-22</td>
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<td>Shenshu BL-23</td>
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<td>Dachangshu BL-25</td>
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**Stationary Cups to Balance 5 Elements**

(& the 5 Corresponding Yin meridians)

Leave on for 10-15 minutes

(Be aware that Ecchymosis may result)
Repeat the following sequence for each of these sections of the body: Neck (prone), Arms and Legs (prone or supine), Abdomen (supine)

1. Effleurage with one or two cups parallel to the muscle fibers up and down 3x. Start with small cups and if client prefers more intense negative pressure, use larger cups.
2. Circle up and circle down 3x
3. Cross Fiber/Zig Zag up and down 3x
4. Fish Bite up toward lymph nodes 3x
5. Shake up with vigorous cross-fiber motion 3x

Thank you for sharing your presence! You help our dreams come true!!

With loving kindness, Heath and Nicole Reed

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