

## THE USE OF CUPPING IN CHINESE MEDICINE



Practitioners of Chinese Medicine have been using cupping for thousands of years, together with herbs, moxibustion, acupuncture and massage. Cupping is an integral part of Chinese medicine and was also known as the 'horn method' (using animal horns) in Ancient times when it was recorded in the 'book of the Fifty Two Prescriptions' a book dating back to the Han Dynasty (206BC-AD).

The main purpose of cupping is to invigorate the blood, disperse congestion of Qi (life force) and blood; this encourages the body's inherent ability to rejuvenate and maintain balance.

As clinical practice expanded and developed so too the methods and materials used for cupping were improved. Today, in the West, cupping is practiced with the use of either glass cups or plastic vacuum cups, both achieve the same results.

With glass cups, a flame is used to remove any air inside the cup; it is then placed rapidly on the area of the body to be treated. This procedure creates a vacuum under the cup, which pulls the skin firmly, slightly raising the area underneath the cup.

A flame is not needed for the plastic cups as the air is removed manually with the aid of a suction 'gun' which pulls out the air through a nozzle in the top of the cup, creating a vacuum which pulls the skin firmly. Both methods are suitable for effective cupping although the plastic cups have the advantage of being much easier to use. Some practitioners prefer the glass cups but they require quite a lot more proficiency to be able to use them quickly in a busy practice. In the hands of an experienced practitioner both methods are safe and effective.

According to Chinese Medicine, the fundamental energy of the Universe is called 'Qi,' (pronounced 'chee') this energy flows through everything, is not usually seen, can more easily be felt and is a very subtle energy. The nature of Qi is warm and flowing, so if Qi becomes congested within our bodies it can lead to poor micro-circulation, eventually creating congestion in the body especially in the muscles. Chinese Medicine also states that 'Qi leads the blood' this means that our innate energy or 'Qi' actually pulls the blood along its course.

Our Qi can be weakened in many ways; poor diet; working too hard; not enough sleep; not enough exercise; volatile emotions. When some or even all of these factors combine, Qi can become excess or deficient, slow down or move recklessly it is then less effective in moving blood circulation which can lead to congestion.

Obviously, even with less energy and congested circulation of blood, it is still possible to function on a day to day level. As one becomes accustomed to having less vitality and being unaware of tightness in the back or other muscles, tiredness, sore lower back or muscular fatigue may be a part of everyday life.

The main area of the body that is treated by cupping is the back, although any area can be treated. Cupping is commonly used to disperse or invigorate Qi and Blood, the muscles either side of the spine from the neck to the sacrum are a natural area to do this.

The back muscles have a direct connection to the spinal nerves that enervate the organs, through this connection the cups can stimulate the nerves, increase blood flow to both the muscles and organs, removing any congestive build-up (toxins) that may have formed in any area. The muscles of the back have a tendency toward storing toxins, their removal is known in Chinese Medicine as 'clearing stagnant blood and qi'.

Although the practitioner much more commonly uses acupuncture or Chinese herbs, cupping seems to be under utilized in Australia, there are reasons for this.

Firstly Cupping does leave marks on the skin where the cups have been, sometimes these marks (round, red or purplish bruises) concern clients as they can look strongly marked. Family or friends tend to be more concerned as they think a lot of pain must have been involved to create such marks. This is not true as some people mark very easily and the cups are applied at the level of tightness to suit each person's level of comfort. It is up to the practitioner to check with his client and the client should let the practitioner know when they feel discomfort, the cups can then be adjusted accordingly.

As I have mentioned the cups will make some marks, they can take a week or ten days to clear. An interesting aspect of cupping is that as further cups are applied (usually weekly) the round marks left by the cups becomes less and less noticeable and last for a shorter time. As treatment proceeds, this shows the client and 'the practitioner clearly the improvement that has taken place. Chinese Medicine would say that any 'stagnation' has now been cleared and the energy flow in the area greatly enhanced.

The marks that are left by the cups are in fact areas of congestion that have been pulled up to the surface of the skin from deeper in the muscle allowing

fresh blood and Qi to enter the muscle. Once on the surface of the skin, the body eliminates the surface congestion much more easily, this technique literally 'gets things moving' which is what energy needs to do.

Cups are usually left on the skin for 10-15 minutes, after about 5 minutes the body becomes accustomed to them and starts to relax, at this point the cups are hardly felt at all, they seem to 'disappear.' Usually 2-4 cups are used in a single treatment but 6 or 8 may be used depending on the nature of the condition.

Moving cupping may also be applied during treatments, this feels like a very pleasant massage. Some oil is applied to the skin then the cup is attached and moved with a stroking motion facilitated by oil, moving the cup in this way enables more surface area to be treated, depending on the condition.

In summer when we wear less clothing and pursue more outdoor activities some people may be uncomfortable at the beach or pool with marks on their body. This is why the effects of cupping are explained to each client before applying any cups and perhaps an agreed schedule of treatment can be used which will suit the client. Some people do not bother about the marks at all in fact they love showing their friends as the marks always get a reaction from those unfamiliar with cupping!

Some common conditions for which cupping is very effective are; Tightness and soreness in the muscles of the upper or lower back, fatigue, headaches, sports injuries, colds and flu, numbness and pain.

Cupping is usually combined with acupuncture or moxa when the practitioner thinks it is appropriate, it can enhance treatments and speed up the recovery process, which makes it a very useful tool of Chinese Medicine

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Other Modalities; Chinese Herbs, Reiki, Massage, Cupping, Moxa

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