



ALL ABOUT CUPPING

by Shoshanna Katzman, L.Ac., M.S.

The purpose of cupping is to break up and disperse stagnation by drawing congested blood and energy to the skin surface, thereby increasing blood flow to the areas treated.

Cupping is a technique that dates back to the ancient Egyptian, Chinese and Middle Eastern cultures. One of the oldest medical textbooks in the world known as The Ebers Papyrus describes how the Egyptians used cupping in 1,550 BCE. And Chinese documentation from three thousand years ago mentions cupping as a treatment for pulmonary tuberculosis. Cupping is also found in A Handbook of Prescriptions for Emergencies in 330 CE written by Taoist herbalist Ge Hong. At first, practitioners applied horns of cattle or cross sections of bamboo to the body. Nowadays, cupping therapy involves placement of small cups on the skin made of glass, bamboo, earthenware or silicone.

The purpose of cupping is to break up and disperse stagnation by drawing congested blood and energy to the skin

surface, thereby increasing blood flow to the areas treated. Chinese cupping is thus a therapeutic method for breaking up blockage in order to restore the natural flow of energy throughout the body. This serves to relieve pain based on the well-known Chinese medicine saying: "If there is free flow, there is no pain. If there is no free flow, there is pain."

Even with this rich history, it was not until more recently that it grabbed the attention of the American public. This happened when athlete Michael Phelps showed up at the Olympics with dark circles on his body from having received cupping to keep his muscles loosened. Other celebrities such as Gwyneth Paltrow, Jennifer Aniston and David Arquette's endorsement of cupping has also contributed to its growing popularity.

The traditionally used method for

creating suction in the cups entails soaking a cotton ball in a flammable substance such as rubbing alcohol, setting it on fire, placing it in the cup to heat the air inside, then quickly removing the cotton ball and placing the cup on areas of the skin being treated. As the air inside the cup cools a vacuum is created, causing the skin and superficial muscle layers to be lightly drawn up into the cup. Another more recent cupping method involves the use of a hand pump to create the vacuum inside the cup instead of heat. With both of these techniques the skin becomes reddened as the blood vessels expand.

The average number of cups applied varies from 3-15 per treatment. A recipient feels a pulling sensation as they are applied. Once suctioned, the cups are left in place up to ten minutes during which time the patient relaxes and even falls asleep. Although, some practitioners employ a "gliding cupping" technique that involves gently moving the cups along the skin, usually after oil has been applied to the skin. The amount of discoloration of the skin existing after the cups are removed is indicative of the level of stagnation released from the body. It can take up to ten days for the skin color to look normal again, therefore this is something to always take into consideration. It is also essential to note that cupping is contraindicated if skin is inflamed, a person has a tendency to bleed easily, during a high fever and if one

is pregnant, has a convulsive disorder or an underlying health condition.

Cupping therapy is typically provided along with acupuncture, but it can also be used alone. Like acupuncture, cups are placed according to the energetic lines of meridian pathways to target acupuncture points and specific areas of pain to re-align, re-balance and open the flow of qi (vital energy). It is traditionally known to be effective for encouraging blood flow, loosening muscles, relieving muscle spasms, increasing range of motion, reducing pain, eliminating inflammation, resolving swelling and calming the nervous system. It is also believed to release toxins and other harmful substances from the body by opening the pores of the skin. In addition, cupping is traditionally used for respiratory conditions such as congestion, bronchitis and asthma. It is also known to help alleviate anxiety, fatigue, headaches, arthritis, rheumatism, gastro-intestinal issues, hypertension, infertility and even cellulite.

As with all alternative therapies, it is imperative to consult a physician prior to treatment. And to make sure that treatment is received from a highly qualified practitioner. Overall, this ancient technique helps the body function better, leading to a sense of well-being. Most find the experience of cupping to be a relaxing experience, one that brings them great relief. It is most certainly a therapy worth giving a try. Shoshanna Katzman, L.Ac., M.S. is an acu-

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