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Ancient Chinese technique of cupping offers pain relief without drugs or surgery

by Alexis Black

More and more people in the Western world are turning to ancient techniques of Chinese medicine after conventional medical treatments fail them. However, several of these alternative treatments are still unfamiliar to Westerners. While practices like acupuncture and acupressure have become familiar to most Americans, one less-talked-about Chinese medicine therapy that can benefit people suffering from chronic pain is called "cupping."

Cupping is a technique in which glass cups are heated from the inside with fire to create a vacuum and then placed on the afflicted area of the body. The cup's suction pulls at the skin and is said to "suck out" the body's [toxins](#). Sound uncomfortable? If done correctly, the practice can actually relieve much of the body's discomfort caused by the congestion of blood, energy or mucus, as well as swelling or pain, according to "The Herbs Of Life" author Lesley Tierra.

Cupping is said to help improve circulation and "to 'open' the [lungs](#), draw toxins out of them and towards the skin surface and to facilitate better breathing," writes "Heart Disease" author Burton Goldberg. More in line with ancient Chinese philosophy, cupping "is believed to draw out Cold, Wind, and Damp," writes Michael Castleman in "Blended Medicine." Cupping can be effective for a wide range of ailments, according to Tierra, including "edema, swellings, asthma, [bronchitis](#), dull aches and pains, [arthritis](#), abdominal pain, stomachache, indigestion, headache, low [back pain](#), painful menstruation, coughs from excessive mucus and places where bodily movement is limited and painful."

The heated cups used in the technique are placed on the skin above the pained muscle area or above an [acupuncture](#) point at the afflicted area. "The vacuum created by the heat is said to dispel dampness from the body, warm the qi and reduce swelling," writes Barrie R. Cassileth, PhD., in "The Alternative Medicine Handbook." The cups are left in place for five to 15 minutes, and when removed, they usually leave a round red bruise behind. According to Tierra, bruising occurs in spots where congestion existed. Although bruises can take several days to go away, the temporary marks are a small price to pay for the relief the therapy provides. Tierra says people suffering from either pain or congestion often notice an immediate difference after treatment.

"I've found cupping to be a completely safe, yet highly effective treatment for reducing pain, treating sprains and enhancing localized circulation," reports Mike Adams, a consumer health advocate and proponent of Traditional Chinese Medicine therapies. Adams recommends a simple vacuum-pump cupping device rather than resorting to the more traditional fire-heated cups. "A surprisingly large number of people suffer from dark, stagnating blood I call 'sludge blood.' Cupping helps pull that blood out of the area, making room for fresh, oxygenated, nutrient-rich blood to replenish the tissues and accelerate the healing process," he says.

However, cupping is not right for every person or every area of the body. Tierra advises for cupping not to be done on the abdomen or lower back of [pregnant women](#), on allergic skin conditions or ulcerated sores, or during high fever, convulsions or cramps. In addition, cupping is not effective on areas of the body where there is a lot of body hair or irregular angles. According to Burton Goldberg in Alternative Medicine, cupping works best when used together with acupuncture and Chinese [herbs](#).

When choosing medical therapies or treatments that are right for you, it is important to consider all

your options. If mainstream medicine isn't giving you what you need, safe, whole-body health alternatives that have been around for hundreds of years, like cupping and acupuncture, could be worth a try. As with all [alternative therapies](#), it is advised to seek out a practitioner who is qualified to perform the technique.

The Experts speak on cupping:

TRADITIONAL CHINESE MEDICINE: Cupping is an ancient Chinese therapy that helps to regulate the flow of energy and blood. Suction is usually created over the painful area on the body by introducing fire into a cup and placing the cup on the desired point. The amount of suction can be regulated according to the treatment and the age of the patient. Cupping is even more effective when used in conjunction with acupuncture and Chinese herbs.

Alternative Medicine by Burton Goldberg, page 433

Cupping is the treatment of disease by suction of the skin surface. A vacuum is created in small jars which are then attached to the body surface. The vacuum causes a drawing up of the underlying tissues into the cups, pulling inner congestion in the body up and out. When effective in its job, the skin will appear reddened and bruised after the cup is removed. This marking can take several days to disappear, but it will go away. The person should notice an immediate difference in condition, be it congestion or pain.

The Herbs Of Life by Lesley Tierra, page 232

Chinese medicine uses a practice called cupping in which vacuum glass cups are applied to the skin's surface, in this case, on the back, to "open" the lungs, draw toxins out of them and towards the skin surface, and to facilitate better breathing.

Heart Disease by Burton Goldberg, page 187

Cupping is done over areas where there is swelling, pain or congestion, either of energy, blood or mucus. Thus, it is good for edema, swellings, asthma, bronchitis, dull aches and pains, arthritis, abdominal pain, stomachache, indigestion, headache, low back pain, painful menstruation, coughs from excessive mucus, and places where bodily movement is limited and painful.

The Herbs Of Life by Lesley Tierra, page 232

There are two other procedures that an oriental medicine doctor may use in conjunction with acupuncture to draw out external forces such as Cold, Wind, and Damp. They're called bleeding and cupping. "Chinese bleeding is much different from the bloodletting that Western medicine practiced centuries ago," Dr. Korngold says. "The Chinese use tiny pinpricks, so actual blood loss is negligible."

Blended Medicine by Michael Castleman, page 10

Rather than using burning leaves, cupping creates suction above the part of the body that requires treatment. Suction is created by warming the air inside a glass jar and turning the jar over on the patient's body. The vacuum created by the heat is said to dispel dampness from the body, warm the qi, and reduce swelling. Cupping is recommended particularly for cases of bronchial congestion and chronic ailments such as arthritis and bronchitis.

The Alternative Medicine Handbook By Barrie R Cassileth PHD, page 30

Cautions: cupping should not be done during high fever, convulsions or cramps, or over allergic skin conditions, ulcerated sores, or on the abdomen or lower back of pregnant women. It will also be ineffective over areas with irregular body angles, where the muscles are thin, the skin is not level or where there is a lot of body hair.

The Herbs Of Life by Lesley Tierra, page 232

Another traditional treatment, especially for large muscle pain, is cupping, which utilizes a glass or

bamboo cup to create suction on the skin above a painful muscle or acupuncture point. In place of needles, the acupuncturist may substitute electrostimulation, ultrasound waves, laser beams, or heat to acupuncture points. In China, experiments have included the use of synthetic needles, sonar rays, and injections of water or steroids into acupuncture points.

Alternative Medicine by Burton Goldberg, page 70

Cups should be retained in place from 5 to 15 minutes, depending on the strength of suction. Especially in hot weather, or when cupping over shallow flesh, the duration of treatment should not be too long. Often I have seen the cups pop off for no apparent reason. If the suction was good in the first place, then generally this is an indication that suction is not needed in that place, or there was too much body hair for the cup to hold. It is also possible for the cup to remain in place and still be unnecessary, and, if so, no redness or bruising will occur. Bruises occurring under the cups indicate where the congestion has been. I have also seen blisters appear which should be dressed and treated to prevent infection.

The Herbs Of Life by Lesley Tierra, page 232

The practitioner places the jar mouth-down over the affected area. The fire reduces the air pressure in the jar, so when the jar is placed against your skin, your skin gets sucked up inside. This is believed to draw out Cold, Wind, and Damp. If performed by a qualified oriental medicine doctor, both bleeding and cupping are considered safe and useful.

Blended Medicine by Michael Castleman, page 10

Cupping is another ancient Chinese and Indian remedy in which heated cups are placed on the skin, sometimes after small punctures are made at the intended location. This process produces a suction force that is thought to boost circulation and improve health.

The Alternative Medicine Handbook By Barrie R Cassileth PHD, page 17

In general, however, Chinese herbalism and Chinese food cures are almost always practiced together. Likewise, it is also customary for an acupuncturist to practice manipulative therapy as well, but today in China one can also see manipulative therapy set up as a separate department in hospitals the same way as acupuncture. Broadly speaking, traditional [Chinese medicine](#) can be divided into internal medicine, which includes herbalism and food cures, and external medicine, which includes acupuncture and manipulative therapy as well as other external treatment techniques such as moxibustion, [acupressure](#), ironing, and cupping.

Chinese Herbal Cures By Henry C Lu, page 10

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