

# CUPPING

## IT'S NOT JUST FOR OLYMPIANS!



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**D**id you notice those “cup marks” on the Olympic swimmers this summer? That exposure has suddenly made cupping the rage in this country. Cupping is an ancient treatment that’s very beneficial for a multitude of physical ailments. And it’s not just for elite athletes—even the weekend golfer or gardener can benefit.

It appears the Chinese developed cupping, and it is included in Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) acupuncturist training to this day. One of the earliest uses of cupping was recorded around 300 A.D by a Taoist alchemist who did cupping with animal horns to drain pustules. In a Tang Dynasty book, cupping is mentioned as treatment for pulmonary tuberculosis. Over the years, cups have been made from bamboo, pottery, hollowed out stones, brass, or iron; now in modern day, we use glass or plastic.

Plastic cups come in two basic forms: soft pliable silicone that is squeezed to remove the air inside and then placed on the body, or hard plastic cups with a valve on the top for a hand pump that sucks out the air, creating a vacuum effect. These plastic cups do not work for sliding cupping and feel a bit “pinchier” than glass cups.

Glass cups have a thick wall and a smooth rounded lip, making them very sturdy and easy to clean. In order to create suction with glass cups, an alcohol-dipped cotton ball is held in a clamp and then lit on fire and quickly put in and out of the cup—this eats up the oxygen and creates a vacuum; then the glass cup is very quickly placed on the skin. The downside to these type of cups is that some buildings/businesses forbid the use of open flames, and it takes a more skilled practitioner to get the right amount of suction. BUT they feel better on the client, are easier to clean and sanitize, can be

used for sliding cupping, and have the potential for greater suction.

Either type of cup has the same effects: to increase blood flow to the area (bringing oxygen and nutrients to the cells, and removing metabolic waste), to remove stagnation (congestion, blockages, adhesions), to loosen muscles and connective tissue (the fascia), and to release scar tissue. Here are some specific examples of conditions that cupping can help:

- *Frozen shoulder, rotator cuff injuries, restricted or painful shoulder movement.* Cupping will bring increased blood flow to this highly tendonous area. Tendons heal more slowly than muscle tissue because there isn’t as much blood flow in a tendon as in muscle. Muscles are red = lots of blood; tendons are white = not so much blood. The red marks left by cupping are evidence of the increase in healing blood flow to the area.
- *Scar tissue from surgeries or trauma.* Numbness, pain, restricted movement, and the “ugliness” of scars can all be helped by cupping. When combined with manual myofascial release and acupuncture, cupping can be especially effective at reducing both visible and deep scar tissue. Scars are a “road bump” to smooth Qi (energy) flow within the body and can cause referred pain or restricted movement in adjacent or even distal areas.
- *Muscle tightness, pain, and trigger points.* In my opinion, 20 to 30 minutes of cupping is at least as effective (if not more) than an hour of deep tissue massage—and it’s typically much less painful.
- *Sciatic, low back, or hip pain.* Cups can release tissues up to a couple inches deep in the body. This makes cupping particularly effective in treating sciatica, piriformis syndrome,

hip and low back pain—areas where pain can originate fairly deep within the body.

- *Asthma, cough, chest congestion.* Cupping of the upper back, along the ribs and diaphragm, and the accessory breathing muscles can help kick out colds and chest congestion as well as improve ease of breathing for those with asthma.
- *Plantar fasciitis.* Cupping to the calves and along the Bladder Meridian, combined with acupuncture, can dramatically help relieve plantar fasciitis and heel pain.
- *Carpal Tunnel Syndrome.* Cupping the forearms and palms can help relieve stagnation, tightness, and inflammation that contribute to carpal tunnel symptoms of numbness, pain, and tingling in the hands and arms (even up to the shoulder).
- *Digestive issues.* Abdominal cupping can help relieve bloating and constipation.
- *Cellulite.* Sliding cupping may help reduce the dimpling appearance of cellulite and improve lymph flow in the area.

### What to expect in a cupping session

Cups can be applied to dry skin, but usually some sort of lubricant, either oil or gel, is used to facilitate a good seal as well as allow for sliding cupping. The cups will provide a mild to strong suction depending on your condition and comfort level. They may or may not be moved around on the skin—called sliding or stationary cupping respectively. The

practitioner may wear gloves just in case microscopic blood or body fluids seep out due to the suction.

How tight the cups feel to you will depend upon the tightness of your tissues and how strongly the cups are adhered. It usually starts out as a pinchy, “weird” feeling that eases up over time. If it feels painful, the cups can be loosened or removed and placed again with a lighter amount of suction. Many clients consider a cupping session to be very relaxing. The cups are typically left in place for five to 10 minutes. They may either be removed and placed a couple more times or moved with the suction intact (sliding cupping), depending upon your tolerance level and treatment goals. Red circular marks will usually be the reddest the first time, and may last five to 10 days. If the cupping was for pain, relief usually arrives pretty quickly—sometimes instantly—reaching the full effect a day or two after treatment. Cupping can be repeated once the cup marks fade. Cupping may be used in conjunction with acupuncture and/or massage or as a standalone modality.

Cupping is a fast-growing, highly effective option for a variety of conditions, but it is not appropriate for everyone. Therefore it is important to see a practitioner of Traditional Chinese Medicine (an acupuncturist with a master’s degree) or a massage therapist with additional training in cupping.

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