

## CUPPING THERAPY

### What is Cupping?

Cupping is one of the oldest and most effective methods of releasing toxins from the body's tissues and organs. Other terms for cupping are: fire cupping, body vacuuming, and the horn method. Cupping is the practice of applying a partial vacuum by means of heat or suction in one or several bell-shaped vessels (suction cups) to parts of the skin. This causes the tissues beneath the cup to be drawn up and swell increasing blood flow to the affected area. This enhanced blood flow under the cup draws impurities and toxins away from the nearby tissues and organs towards the surface for elimination. The time the suction cups are left in place varies according to the patient's age and physical constitution, and the medical disorder being treated.

Cupping is a safe, non-invasive and inexpensive technique. It is used to alleviate the pain and discomfort arising from disorders of the lungs and other internal organs, muscle spasms, joint pains, and numerous other conditions.

Cupping acts to draw inflammation and pressure away from the deep organs (especially the heart, brain, lungs, liver and kidneys) towards the skin. This facilitates the healing process. Practitioners of cupping contend that this process strengthens the immune system, so encouraging the optimum functioning of the body. *In other words, it assists the actions of Physis.* In doing so, it diverts toxins and other harmful impurities from these vital organs towards the less-vital skin, before expulsion. The blood which is diverted allows for a fresh 'stream' of blood to that area.

### History of Cupping

#### Cupping in the Western World and the Middle East

The ancient Egyptians were the first to use cupping therapy. The oldest medical text book, written in approximately 1550 BC, in Egypt, describes bleeding by cupping used to 'remove the foreign matter from the body'. Hippocrates and Galen were also great advocates of cupping. In the early days the technique was used solely for bleeding purposes. There were two schools of thought as far as disease was concerned:

- a) starve the source of the sickness of the body
- b) bleed to drain it away

Among the Egyptians and various nations, cupping appears to have been considered a remedy for almost every type of disease as well as an important means of preserving life.

In the book ‘*Galen on Blood letting*’, disease and health are defined in terms of nature, ‘Disease is an unnatural state of the body which impairs a function’. This statement ties up with the philosophical principles of Tibb where ‘imbalance occurs as a result of an individual moving away from his/her ideal qualitative state’ = unnatural state resulting in the manifestation of disease. Galen continues:

*‘The nature does its best to restore unnatural states to their healthy condition. The function of the Physician is to cooperate with her. When a patient is suffering from a disease, nature is struggling to overcome the Pathogenic agents and if she is plainly succeeding the Physician should do nothing. If however she is getting the worse of the struggle, he must come to her aid by doing what she would do if she could. The Physician must preserve what is according to nature, eliminating what is not.’*

Galen continues in saying that the principle indication for blood letting is to eliminate residues or divert blood from one part to another. The advantage of blood letting over other forms of haemorrhage is that the doctor can stop the flow whenever he/she wishes. According to Galen’s system of pathology, all medical diseases are due to dyscrasia (a faulty state of the constitution or a morbid condition of the blood due to some general disease). He believes that all doctors need to do in such circumstances is to restore the balance of the humours in the body.

It is of great importance to evaluate the constitution of the individual before implementing a treatment plan as patients differ considerably in their healthy and diseased state, e.g. patients with a melancholic/phlegmatic temperament are more likely to suffer from conditions associated with excess cold such as osteo-arthritis as oppose to heat related conditions such as boils.

### Cupping in the Jewish tradition

The chief Rabbi of Egypt, Rabbi Moshe Ben Maimon referred to this type of therapy in his medical book *Mishna Thora-Hilchot Deot*. His book focuses on blood and diseases, where it is states that most diseases arises in the blood, therefore, it is not considered a remedy but on the contrary, bleeding and cupping are recommended as modes of therapy.

### Cupping in the Middle East and the Muslim World

Cupping is known as ‘Hajama’ in the Arabic world which translates ‘to restore to basic size’ or ‘to diminish in volume’. The Prophet Muhammed PBUH is reported to have been a user and advocate of cupping therapy. It has been reported that the Prophet PBUH said:

*Cupping and puncturing the veins are your best remedies.*

The author of Al-Qunun, Ibn Sina, said: ‘cupping is not preferred in the beginning nor the end of the month. It is preferred in the middle of the month when the substances (of the constitution or the condition) accumulate and become agitated. In a different Hadith: ‘ The Prophet PBUH use to have cupping done on the 17<sup>th</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> day of the lunar month’, the most beneficial time was reported to be 2-3 hours after taking a bath. Fasting a day before the cupping was also recommended.

### Early Cupping Instruments



It is believed that cupping was first used in the ancient practice to suck blood from poisonous wounds. The earliest cupping instruments were hollowed horns with a small hole at the top through which the cupper would suck up the blood from the scarification previously made with a blade.

In time, various natural resources began to be used to create suction. For example, natives along the west coast of North America, in the vicinity of Vancouver Island, used shells. In Europe, Asia, Africa and North America, hollow animal horns were fashioned to provide an effective cupping device.

In North America, the natives made their cupping implements by slicing off the point of a buffalo horn. They would then place the base of the horn on the body and suck the air out through the opening at the tip. When a vacuum was achieved, the opening of the horn would be closed off by the practitioners tongue. During the Babylon - Assyrian Empire (stretching from Iraq to the Mediterranean) massage was practiced as well as 'cupping by sucking, with the mouth or by using a buffalo horn. The source of this information was



presumably found inscribed on clay tablets, written in one of the earliest written languages, i.e. cuneiform script around 700BC.

VOTIVE TABLET represents cupping and bleeding instruments from Temple of Asclepius at Athens. In the centre,

a representation of a folding case containing scalpels of various forms is depicted. On either side are cupping vessels.

### The decline of cupping from the mid to late 1800s

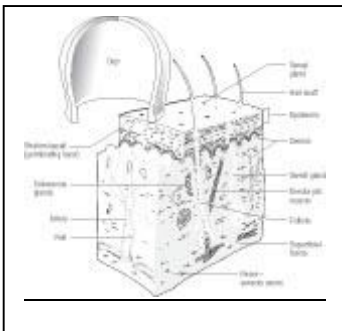
By the mid to late 1800s, cupping was sharply criticized by the medical fraternity and had fallen away as a popular method. There were a few speculations as to why this happened.

- It was during this period that the newly established scientific model of medicine began discrediting all other previously established traditional therapies in order to gain medical dominance.

Opposition to cupping was therefore not based on a lack of effectiveness, but because of its lack of "fit" with the growing interests and authority of the medical fraternity. This was relayed onto a set of social processes that stigmatized cupping and changed people's attitude to many traditional practices. However over the past couple of decades the tide has turned and people are rediscovering that some practices have plenty of merit, hence the re-awakening of cupping as therapeutic option.

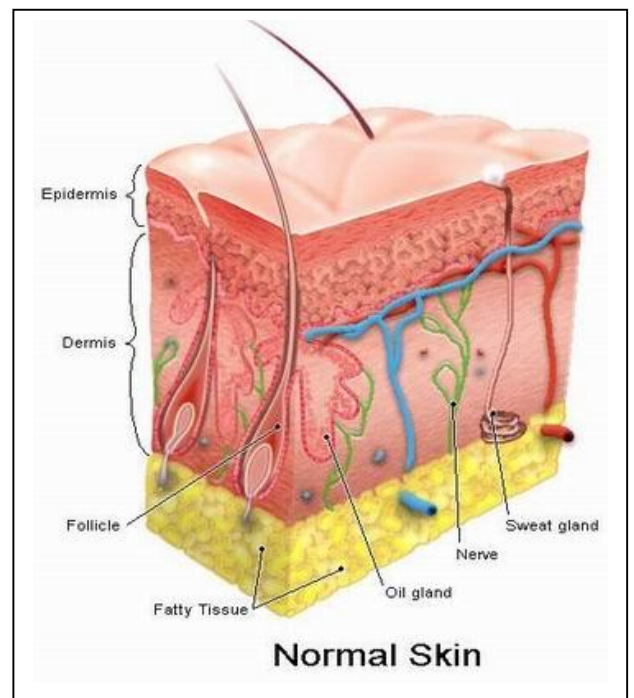
### Benefits of Cupping therapy

Before listing the benefits of cupping therapy, it is important to first look at the skin and its relation to the internal organs, the lymphatic and the immune system.



### Skin

Any topical stimulus destined to influence and manipulate internal or external organs must start at the skin level. The skin is our largest organ, containing fluid, blood, blood vessels, connective tissue, muscles and a rich nerve supply. Our body's first direct contact with the outside world is through the skin. It is also true

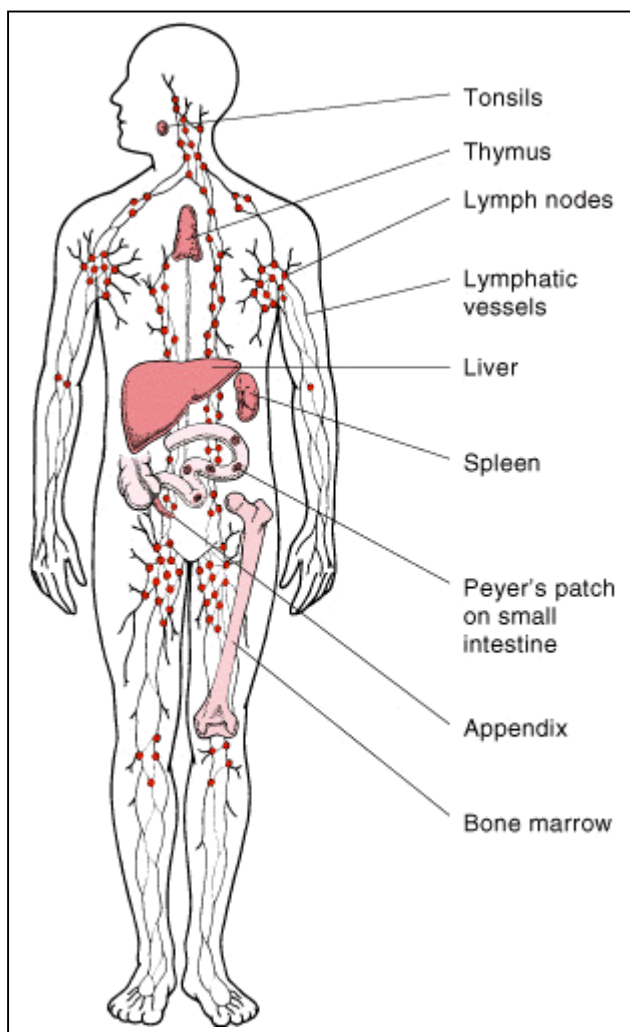


to say that our skin is the mirror of our health: in good health the skin is shiny, tight and has a smooth texture. It responds to changes in temperature and is generally warm when touched. When the body is unhealthy, a dull, lifeless skin with little natural colour is observed. Apart from protecting the body from external pathogens, the skin has a major role in a number of body functions. It is the main organ of sensation, through millions of nerve endings contained in its structure. A rich network of blood vessels and glands provides an effective means of temperature control. There are two main layers of the skin: the outer epidermis and the inner dermis. The fatty subcutaneous region lies beneath these two. The epidermis is the cellular layer of the skin, varying in thickness from 0.1 mm in the eyelid to over 1 mm on the palms and soles. It has no nerves, connective tissue or blood vessels. In stimulating a particular point on the skin, a practitioner can influence and change a particular organ's blood flow.

### Lymphatic system

The lymphatic system is made up of lymphatic vessels and lymph nodes that extend throughout the body. It helps maintain the balance of fluid in the body by draining excess fluid from the tissues of the body and returning it to the blood system. Closely related to the cardiovascular system, the lymphatic system has several major functions, e.g. filtering out bacteria, producing lymphocytes, generating antibodies, etc. In addition to lymph (fluid circulating in the system), the system includes lymphatic capillaries and large vessels, lymph nodes, spleen, tonsils and thymus. Apart from producing antibodies, the lymphatic system is also responsible for the collection of fatty globules from the intestine.

The lymph system also preserves the fluid balance throughout the body. All forms of massage or therapies involving the stimulation of the skin surface will result in the improvement of blood and lymph circulation. One advantage that blood circulation has over lymph circulation is that blood is pumped around the body by



means of the heart. In contrast, the circulation of lymph relies on breathing, movement (walking or exercise) or external pressure.

As the lymph circulates between the cells, it collects waste matter including dead blood cells and toxic materials. While blood is responsible for collecting and distributing oxygen, nutrients and hormones nourishing the entire body, the lymphatic system is responsible for collecting and removing waste products in the tissues. When this waste is not collected adequately or effectively, it congregates as a localized congestion.

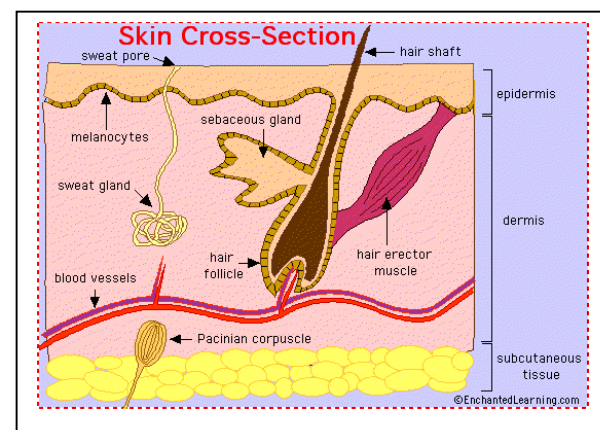
During cupping therapy, both blood and lymph circulatory systems are simultaneously stimulated to work more efficiently. This results in a more efficient collection and transportation mechanism for toxic substances, depositing it into the lymphatic system to be destroyed and allowing the circulation of fresh lymph in order to nourish the tissues and generate a booster for the immune system.

*“When energy flows, illness goes”* [Chinese aphorism]

Cupping regulates the energy and blood flow. It helps draw out and eliminate the imbalanced quality i.e. heat, cold, moistness, dryness. Cupping also opens the pores of the skin thus allowing for the precipitation of pathogens through the skin. Nothing moves blood and energy as efficiently as cupping. Where the patient’s energy is deficient, the movement of blood would be slow, if the energy is abundant, the movement will be much quicker. The main objective of treatment is to remove the cause of disharmony from the body, restore the circulation of blood, energy and fluids thus aiding physis in re-establishing homeostasis.

### Effects of cupping therapy

- a) skin
  - rise in skin temperature
  - promotion of metabolism in skin tissue
  - better functioning sweat and sebaceous glands
  - accelerates the secretion of salts and sebaceous matter and excretion of water
  - strengthens the renewal power of the skin
  - increase skins resistance to various harmful conditions

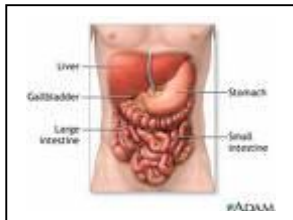


b) muscles

- stimulates the expansion of blood vessels in the muscle hence increase blood flow
- facilitates the flow of lymph

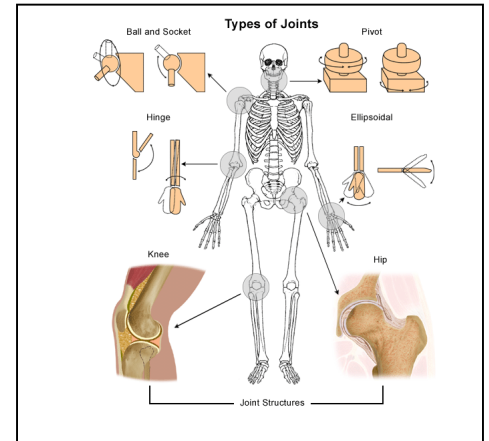
c) joints

- increase blood flow to the joint
- increase the secretion of synovial fluids



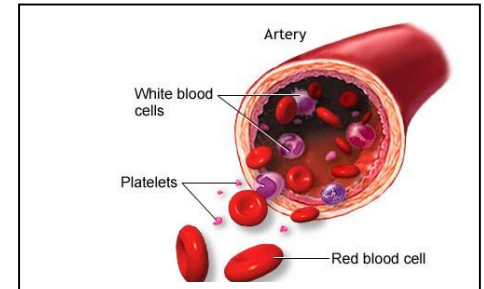
d) digestive organs

- stimulates the target organ
- increase in peristalsic movements
- increase secretion of digestive fluids



e) blood

- increase in blood circulation
- rise in low blood pressure
- influences the composition of blood: RBC and WBC, pH



f) nervous system

- stimulates sensory nerves of the skin
- affects ANS

## Types of Cupping

There are two main types of cupping:

**Dry cupping** – skin immediately below the cup is sucked up by a vacuum created inside the cup

**Wet cupping** – in which the skin immediately below the cup is cross cut superficially several times – *lightly lacerated* – so that blood would actually be drawn out by the vacuum from the skin into the cup.

For both forms of cupping, the patient should be advised to increase their water intake.

*Dry cupping is always used before wet cupping is considered.*

The use of whichever form of cupping is at the discretion of the practitioner.

## Clinical Benefits of Cupping

The benefits of cupping continue for several days after the procedure – *extended action*.

### Cupping has been found to:

- Affect the body up to four inches into the tissues, causing them to release toxins
- Activate the lymphatic system
- Clear colon blockages
- Help activate and clear the veins, arteries and capillaries
- Activate the skin, clear stretch marks and improve varicose veins

In the case of wet cupping (which may or may not follow dry cupping), the following additional benefits follows:

- The release of toxins from the cupping site
- The release of pressure/toxins that may have accumulated – especially in inflammation conditions can provide instant relief
- The elimination of blood volume, however little, allows Physis to restore the humoral balance both qualitatively and quantitatively

### Special precautions

Although the cupping procedure is usually trouble and consequence free, adverse reactions can result from the patient's psychological response. For example, the sight of blood and the patient's apprehension can precipitate an undesired reaction.

Should any of the following symptoms appear – paleness, nausea, dizziness, actual vomiting, and perspiration – the procedure should be discontinued and the patient encouraged to have a rest, lie down, and take a drink of natural or sugared water.

Although there are no firm contraindications to cupping, it should be used with circumspection in children, seriously ill patients, those with abnormally low blood pressure, and the aged. In these cases cupping can be done with discretion, and under special and defined circumstances.

- Dry cupping is not recommended for children below the age of 3 years.
- Wet cupping should be avoided in children below the age of 6 years.

- Wet cupping should not be carried out in patients above 65 years of age, although dry cupping can be used in the elderly.
- Precautions should be observed for menstruating women.
- It is not advisable to apply cupping to the patient with skin ulcers, oedema, or on an areas overlying large blood vessels or even varicose veins
- In addition, patients with high fever or who suffer from convulsions should not be cupped.
- Cupping should not be applied to the abdominal and sacral regions of the pregnant women.
- Wet cupping should never be applied to the female breast, unless absolutely necessary.
- Cupping on the neck or on the occipital bone is not advised. This can cause problems with eyesight and memory.
- Cupping on the forehead is likewise not advocated, as this can lead to emotional instability.
- Care should be taken with wet cupping of anaemic patients, or those susceptible to spontaneous bleeding.
- Cupping should not be done on patients who are visibly fatigued (physically or mentally), very hungry/thirsty, distraught, or who have overindulged in alcohol.

#### Safety aspects of Cupping

- The practitioner must wear disposable latex gloves whilst carrying out both types of cupping.
- Before cupping actually begins, the patient's blood pressure and pulse should be checked.
- The blades used for wet cupping incisions should be disposable.
- The incisions in wet cupping should be superficial, involving the epidermis only.
- The patient should be questioned on how he or she feels – any unusual sensation or fever.
- All other necessary safety measures should be in place.

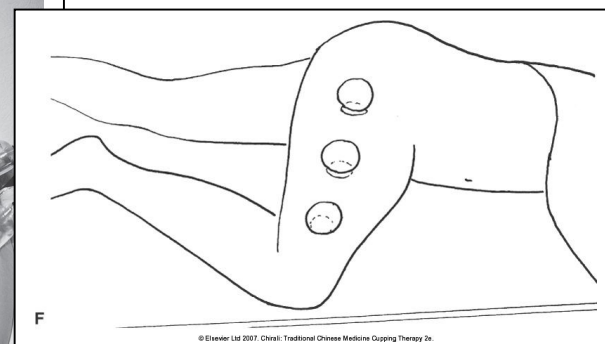
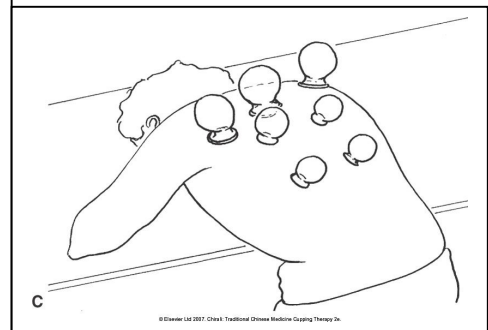
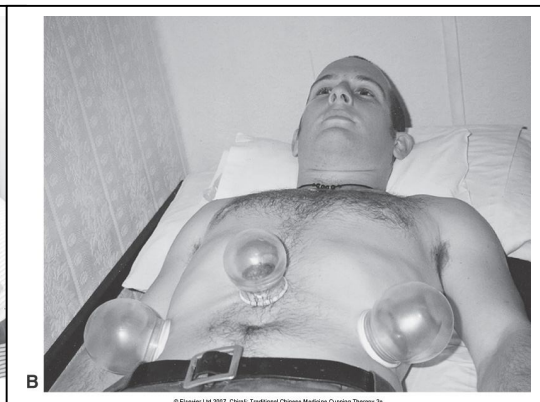
#### The Cupping technique

##### Preliminaries:

- In obese persons and in those suffering from thickened blood (polycythaemia), a hot bath 1 to 2 hours before cupping is recommended. This helps to stimulate blood flow to the skin, so makes cupping that much more effective.
- As cupping is performed on the naked skin, the treatment room should be comfortably warm
- Make sure the patient is relaxed and not suffering from any degree of anxiety

- Explain to the patient what you about to do, demonstrate if necessary on your own arm
- In order to achieve better contact between the cup and the skin, liberally apply a suitable massage oil to the cupping intended area
- The selected areas of skin may be shaved, so that a good seal between the cup and skin can be achieved.
- Patients about to undergo cupping (especially the wet version) should be advised to take a nutritional drink before the cupping.
- Pressure applied to cups will vary according to patients. For medium to large frame patients, and in patients where the cupping sites are endowed with excess fatty tissue, the pressure can be increased. This ensures that the area beneath the glass will respond at a faster rate than on patients who are leaner, and with less fatty tissue.
- Cupping can also be carried out in parallel to massage. Choose the best position suitable for the patient and you as sudden movements are not recommended

The location to be treated is important in deciding the position of the patient. If the cupping is to be performed on the back, the most comfortable position will be prone on a bed or flat surface area; if on the stomach, a supine position is preferred. For the face, knees, neck and shoulders, a sitting position in a chair may be chosen. For the elderly, severe asthmatics or patients who have recently suffered form any heart conditions, an upright sitting position should always be preferred, see figures A-F.



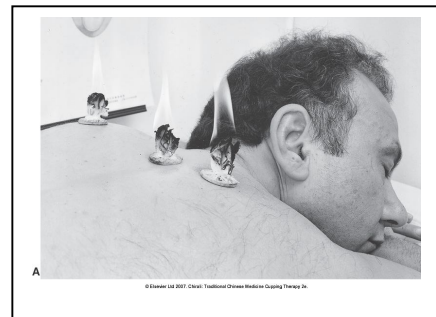
## **The process:**

The vacuum in the glass or hard plastic suction cup is usually created in one of two different ways.

In the traditional method, the cup is heated by a flame from an alcohol soaked cotton pad or taper, then applied immediately to the skin. As the oxygen burns up, a vacuum is created "sealing" the jar to the skin. The device can be released easily by hand.

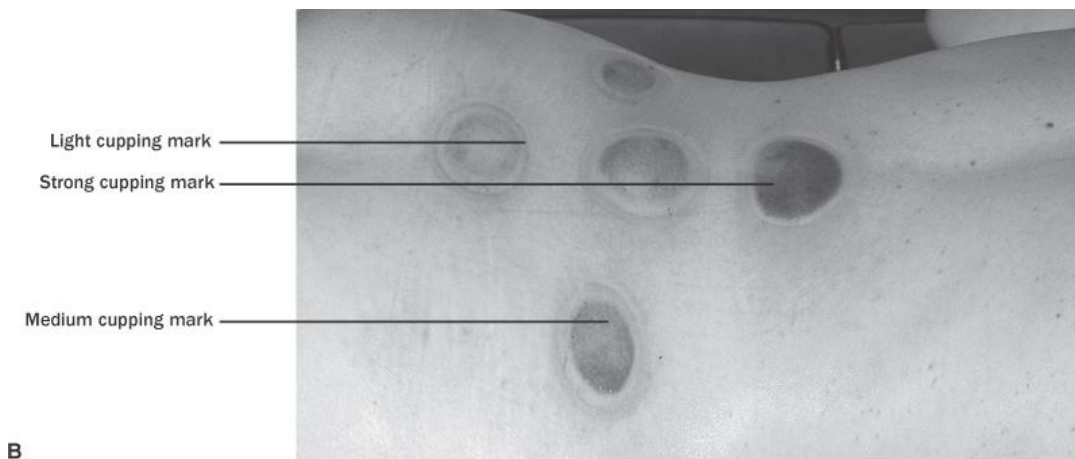
These days, a hand operated vacuum pump is attached to the glass cup, and suction applied by manual action.

- The appropriate sized cups should be used.
- Generally, the cups should be placed on flat sections of the skin (which is usually hair-free, with no bony protuberances, and relatively thick).
- When more than one cup is used simultaneously, the cups should be separated by 1-2 centimeters.
- If wet cupping is to be carried out, the site selected for cup application will be incised superficially with a small blade (lancet). A stinging, but not usually painful, sensation will be experienced.
- The cup is then applied, and the air within will be evacuated with a small hand-held pump. This will draw 20 to 100mls blood into the cup, depending on the skin thickness of the application zone. After this, bleeding stops automatically, as haemostatic mechanisms come into operation.
- The process lasts for around 15 to 20 minutes from application of the cup.
- During cupping, the patient must remain as still as possible.
- Precautions need to be taken on when and where the cups are placed, and for how long they are applied.

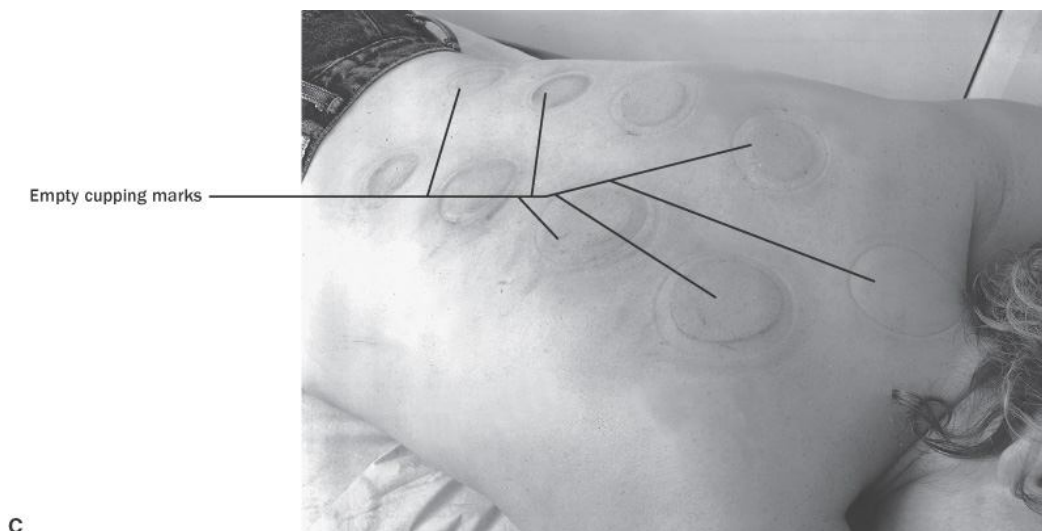


## Afterwards:

- An antiseptic cream should be applied to the incisions after cupping is terminated. The use of honey is not only effective as an antiseptic but also assists in the healing of the skin.
- Adequate nutritious liquids should be taken after cupping.
- Solid food intake should be avoided, if possible, for at least 3 hours.
- No shower or bathing should be carried out for 12 hours after cupping.
- Sexual activity should be refrained from for at least one day.
- After cupping, the following signs may be evident:
  - Redness of the skin (erythema) which disappears after a few weeks
  - Slight itching, as the healing process takes place, at the cupping sites may develop and persist for a few days. Scratching should be discouraged.
  - Light scarring as part of the healing process.



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## 11 Methods of Cupping

In total there are 11 methods of cupping designed to help the practitioner choose the most appropriate cupping method for the patient. These methods are:

- Weak (light) cupping
- Medium cupping
- Strong cupping
- Moving cupping
- Light moving cupping
- Needle cupping
- Moxa (hot needle) cupping
- Empty (flash) cupping
- Full (bleeding/wet) cupping
- Herbal cupping
- Water cupping

### Weak (light) Cupping

It is employed when blood and energy are sluggish or stagnant. The intention is move the stagnation and at the same time tonify the weak energy. The key factor in deciding when to apply weak cupping is the present energetic state of the patient. Evaluation of the pulse and tongue should all point to weakness. The amount of flesh drawn into the cup should be minimal and hardly raised. This method can be applied to almost anywhere on the body and may cause a slight reddening of the skin. Weak cupping is the most gentle method of all cupping and is particularly suitable for debilitated adults, elderly patients and young children, especially those under 7 years of age.

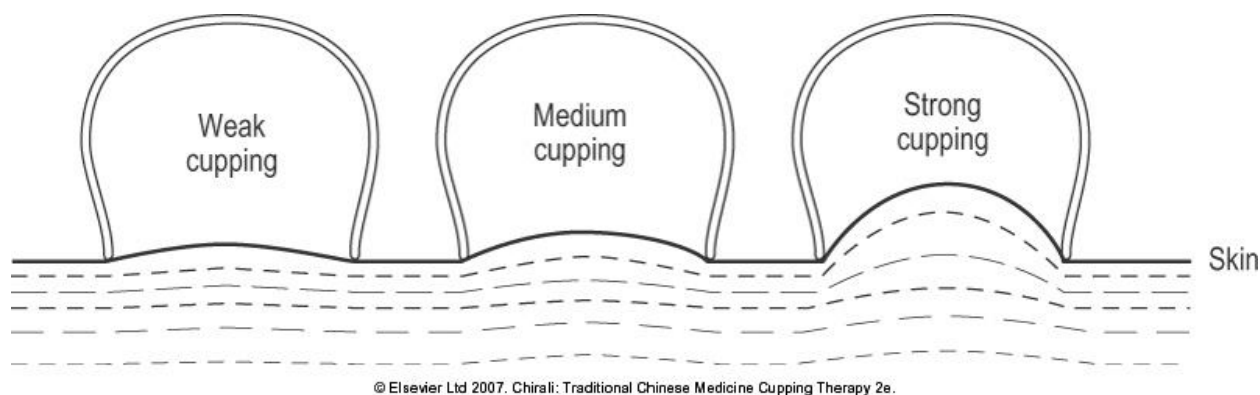
### Medium cupping

This is the most frequently used method on patients. This method can safely be administered to children over 7 years of age. With medium cupping, suction is firmer pulling the skin well into the cup creating a slight redness. Medium cupping can safely be applied anywhere on the body.

### Strong cupping

This is one of the most draining techniques. Therefore before deciding on this method, the practitioner must ensure the suitability of the patient. Pulse and tongue diagnosis should emphasize excess or fullness. This method may sometimes leave the patient feeling tired or drained. A strong vacuum need to

be produced, giving a strong pulling sensation of the skin inside the cup. Because of the strong nature of the pulling action, the skin will quickly turn red and shortly turn purple inside the cup and possible erythema in the skin surrounding the cup. When using the strong cupping method for the first time, the mark is inevitable and can take 15-20 days to disappear completely. The cupping time should be short i.e. 5-10 minutes during the first session which can increase up to 20 minutes during later applications. Strong cupping is often coupled with wet cupping.



### Moving cupping

The objective of this treatment is to apply strong cupping to a much larger area of the body by the moving/sliding action of the cup. This is the most painful cupping method and is often not practiced in Tibb.

### Light moving cupping

Light moving cupping is practiced mainly on patients with relatively full/excessive energy. It is useful and considered the only safe method in the management of lymphatic drainage as well as being the exclusive cupping method in the management of cellulite complaints. During the application, slight pinkish cupping marks appear on the skin, normally following the direction and movement of the cup. At no time should deep, dark red cupping marks be seen. All cupping marks should fade away in a day or two. The whole objective of light cupping is to disperse stasis or stagnation without draining the patient. All moving cupping should require special attention particularly when the skin surface is broken, e.g. scratches, cuts, bruises, open wounds, etc.

Avoid cupping over skin moles.

### Needle cupping and Moxa (hot needle) cupping

Not often practiced in Tibb as it follows acupuncture treatment. The cup is placed over the inserted acupuncture needle.

### Empty (flash) cupping

Empty cupping is also called flash cupping for its speed during application. This is actually medium to strong cupping applied rapidly i.e. the cups remain in place for a very short period (<30 seconds). It is used to stimulate and move blood and energy in the weak and frail. The short duration is enough to stimulate physis and move blood but not enough to drain the patient. This can be repeated for between 5-10 minutes.

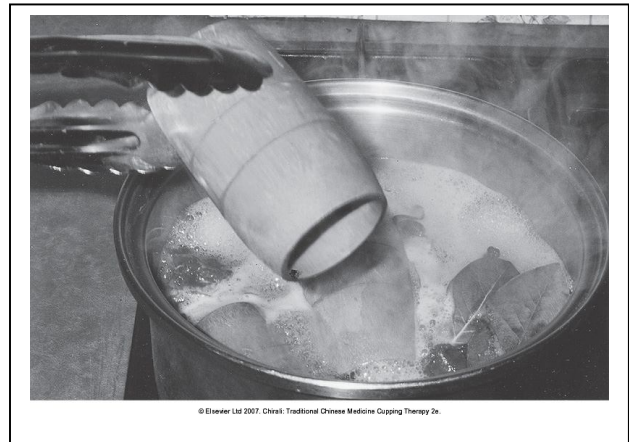
### Full (bleeding/wet) cupping

This is the most favored and practiced method by practitioners. It is used in the treatment of a sudden increase in blood pressure, high fevers, blood stasis and in discharging pus from boils. This method is often combined with strong cupping. After the initial strong cupping, the cup is removed and slight superficial lacerations are made. The cup is then placed back on the site. Most of the blood in the cup will be semicoagulated and therefore still quite fluid. Before removing the cup, the practitioner should wear disposable surgical gloves on both hands. Remove the cups gentle. It is not recommended to bleed the patient more than once a month and not to draw more than 100ml of blood at any one time.

### Herbal cupping

For this method one requires a few bamboo cups, a relatively deep pan, water, metal clamps, some form of fire and herbs based in a prescription based on the treatment. The cups are boiled in the pan with water and the prescribed herbs. The cups are then placed on the patient in the traditional way using (Flame). The herbs are absorbed into the bamboo cups, which in turn transfer their healing properties to the patient. Cups can be left on for 10-20 minutes.

*Precaution:* following the boiling process, some steam remains inside the cup, resulting in a pressure build-up which pushes the cup away from the skin. This can be rectified by resting the hot bamboo cups on a dry towel for up to a minute in order to absorb excess water and at the same time reducing the pressure inside the cup.



### Water cupping

This is one of the least used and practiced cupping methods. The technique involves filling a glass or bamboo cup one-third full with warm water and employing the cupping process quickly. Hold the cup close to the patient with one hand, bring it close to the point to be cupped and insert the burning cotton wool, swiftly and simultaneously turning the cup onto the skin. This method is said to disperse energy and resolve phlegm making it very beneficial for asthma, particularly in children. There is usually no mark left with this method.



### How often can cupping be applied?

Children under the age of 16 - once a week is considered the acceptable frequency. Adults under the age of 60 - as much as twice a week (with the exception of wet cupping)

Adults over the age of 70 – once a week

However, during the ‘acute stage’ of a disease, treatment TDS or even once every day can be beneficial. Similarly, in all age groups when light, empty or light moving cupping is employed, treatment frequency can be increased to as much as once every other day. This is because blood, energy and the lymphatic fluids are gently stimulated rather than forcefully manipulated.