

Massage Cupping Therapy for Health Care Professionals

By Anita J. Shannon, LMBT

The modern world of healing has embraced another wonderful ancient technique that has powerful results. Massage cupping is a modified version of "cupping therapy," which has been used extensively in Chinese medicine for several thousand years.

By creating suction and negative pressure, massage cupping is used to drain excess fluids and toxins; stimulate the peripheral nervous system; bring blood flow to stagnant muscles and skin; and loosen adhesions, connective tissue and stubborn knots in soft tissue.

How Is Cupping Accomplished?

A cotton ball is clamped in hemostats and soaked with about five to 10 drops of alcohol. The cotton is lit, then inserted into the glass cup to create the vacuum. Move the cup over the area to be treated, remove the cotton ball and invert the cup onto the body. If using a manual vacuum set, place the cup on the body and activate the pump to remove the air.



A practitioner lights a cotton ball soaked with alcohol and inserts it into the cup to create the vacuum. There are two main cupping techniques: stationary and moving.

Stationary cups are placed on the skin and left for a period of five to 15 minutes in one location, or four to six cups may be applied and removed cyclically in a technique called "flash cupping." These are the methods most commonly used in Chinese medicine. Moving (or "massage cupping") is the more commonly

used form of cupping among massage therapists and other health care practitioners. Prior to applying the cup, oil is administered to the skin to facilitate smooth movement and palpably discover the areas of tension and congestion. Create the vacuum and place the cup on the affected area, then glide it over the surface. A cup may be "parked" for a short time on stubborn knots or over inflamed joints or tissue. Cupping can be used on the neck, shoulders, back, sacral area, hip, abdomen, thigh, upper arms and calves.

The sensation of cupping is often characterized as deep warmth and tingling, long after the treatment has ended. Cupping is not an irritant to the skin or body. It draws the inflammation out yet does not add to it, and is excellent when used as a contrast therapy with cold compresses or liniments. Massage cupping is often used on the broad areas of the back, which is a wonderful addition to any massage. The treatment is sedating, and people will often descend into a profound state of relaxation. (A deep snore is common!) Larger cups may be used on the back; the strong vacuum will mimic the rolling action of deep tissue massage without the discomfort. The movement may be long and draining, or circular and stimulating, for stubborn knots and areas of rigid tissue.



Massage cupping can be stationary or performed using circular or gliding movements. The skin will redden with strong massage cupping, indicating that circulation has been brought to the surface. Application of liniments, analgesics, plant hydrosols or essential oils immediately following a cupping treatment will aid absorption deep into the tissue. The increased local blood supply will nourish the muscles and skin and allow toxins to be carried away.

Massage cupping is also effective in treating cellulite. A light suction provides drainage, while heavier application can be used to stimulate circulation and loosen adhesions or "dimpling." The thigh and hip region should be treated prior to a wrapping procedure to enhance the absorption of product.

One of the most enjoyable aspects of this technique is the subtle nuance of the movements. Creativity provides a variety of methods, and alteration of pressure and speed produces different sensations. For example, the edge of the cup can be used to "scoop" in a cross-fiber movement, while vigorous circles feel

marvelous on the hips, thighs and shoulders. Long strokes down the sides of the spine and along the ribs provide ease to rib cage expansion and breathing.



Massage cups come in a range of sizes. Stubborn neck tension is soothed using a slow, deep approach with small cups. This is not a technique with limitations - its applications are endless. Clients have often reported that the massage cupping experience stayed with them longer than other treatments and that results are cumulative with consistent sessions. Massage cupping therapy is also easier on the practitioner because it enables the therapist to go deeper without discomfort to the client or themselves.

Massage cupping can be integrated into almost any modality. The equipment is inexpensive (and easily cleaned and stored), practitioners can become proficient quickly with proper training, and it is really fun to do!

Author's note: Photos courtesy of Adam Larson and Davon Emblar.

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