

Pull and Release

An Eastern Medicine technique, cupping has real, lasting effects that may benefit your spa clientele.

The concept of cupping may be little understood, but it's actually a simple yet effective alternative health service that's been used for thousands of years. The treatment has numerous variations and methods, many of which date back to Ancient Egyptian and Middle Eastern times, and some of which are rooted in Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM). One of the earliest references to cupping can be found in the early medical textbook *Ebers Papyrus* and describes how the Ancient Egyptians used the therapy in 1550 B.C.

Cupping is beloved for its ability to relieve back and neck pain, increase blood flow and help heal overworked muscles—which is why it's commonly used by athletes. The technique can be employed to provide clients with everything from deep tissue release to lymphatic drainage; some even believe the therapy lowers cholesterol, alleviates migraines and relieves arthritis pain. Whatever its intended purpose, the process often transports people into a deeply relaxed state.



What Exactly Is Cupping?

Across the entire body, a fibrous sheet of connective tissue called fascia exists as a layer between the skin and muscles. When the fascia grips onto the muscles, it can prevent them from being able to relax. Cupping uses various types of suction to create negative pressure, which pulls up on the skin and fascia and allows the muscle underneath to release. Fresh blood and fluids can then flow throughout the muscle fibers and between the interstitial tissues.

“By drawing stagnant blood and metabolic waste close to the body’s surface, the cups stimulate fresh blood flow to restricted tissue and fascia, flushing them with oxygen and nutrients to support repair and healing,” explains Will Hammett, L.M.T. and C.M.C.P. at PURE Spa in Ambler, Pennsylvania. “That’s what

you see in the marks: trapped blood and waste that had been causing inflammation and irritation in the tissues due to restriction, that is then being released for the body to process. Just like other types of massage, cupping supports venous return and improved circulation, as well as stimulating and supporting lymphatic flow.”

One of the most impressive benefits of cupping therapy is its ability to interact with the peripheral and central nervous systems. “In manual massage, there is an initial sympathetic, fight or flight response to the treatment before the body settles into the parasympathetic state of rest and relax,” expands Hammett. “Cupping virtually skips the first stage and almost immediately puts the client into a deep state of relaxation, which allows for more effective work in less time.”

THE MANY TYPES OF CUPPING



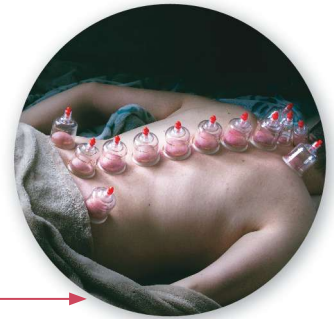
• **DRY CUPPING** The most common method used in the U.S., this application involves creating heat (either with a flame or a combustible material such as alcohol, herbs or paper) inside a specialized glass cup, which is then placed on the tense area. As the air inside the cup cools, it creates a vacuum that causes the skin to rise and blood vessels to expand. Pressure can be made weak, medium or strong based on the amount of heat placed in the cup. The cups can remain “parked” on the skin for a few seconds (referred to as Empty or “Flash” Cupping) or several minutes at a time—in TCM, they’re left in place for up to 15 minutes.



• **VACUUM CUPPING** Sometimes known as Air Cupping, this technique eliminates the use of fire and heat completely, and uses plastic cups that have attached pumps to create suction. This is another extremely popular method as the pumps are simple to use and provide great flexibility in pressure.



• **MOVING CUPPING** Also referred to as Massage Cupping, this method involves a fluid movement of cups. It’s often used in conjunction with Vacuum Cupping, as pumps allow for a larger area to be massaged. Sometimes, silicone or rubber cups are used for even greater flexibility. According to TCM, this method is believed to treat acne, inflammation and skin lesions.



• **MYOFASCIAL CUPPING** This method targets the muscular and skeletal system, and involves suction pumps and a combined technique of moving and parked cups. It may also incorporate pinpointed massage throughout the treatment.



• **WET CUPPING** This is a much more intensive and traditional cupping treatment. The therapist places a cup on the skin for several minutes, then uses a small scalpel to make tiny cuts in the skin. A second suction draws out a small amount of blood. This method is believed—but not proven—to remove harmful substances and toxins.



• Other methods—**MOXA CUPPING** or Hot Needle Cupping, **MAGNETIC CUPPING**, **HERBAL CUPPING** and **WATER CUPPING**—are significantly advanced techniques that involve acupuncture, cylindrical magnets placed within cups, boiling bamboo cups in herbal remedies and artfully filling cups with warm water, respectively. **Facial Cupping** can be performed if a therapist utilizes a special set of small glass cups.

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Is Cupping Right for Your Spa?



It goes without saying that before introducing any new service to a spa environment, it's important to determine whether your guests would actually be interested in it. If your client base frequently comes to your massage therapists for deep tissue massages to relieve chronic back pain, it may be worth inquiring if they'd be open to alternative therapies such as cupping. It's often the clients who regularly work out and have pinpointed muscle pain who can most benefit from it.

Next, it's crucial to hire a certified cupping therapist. The practice isn't well regulated; however, many courses provide certification as a Certified Massage Cupping Practitioner (C.M.C.P.). These include offerings at ACE Massage Cupping & MediCupping (massagecupping.com), taught at various schools across the country. TJ Mundell, L.M.T., M.T.I., owner of Green Lotus Spa & Wellness in Dallas and Colleyville, Texas, initially experienced cupping from a new therapist at his spa. "I have the worst lower back pain; I went to chiropractors, got massages every day, tried acupuncture... nothing was working," recalls Mundell. "On this MT's first shift she performed a cupping treatment on my back. After 20 minutes, my pain was gone. I added cupping to our menu the very next day." In fact, he was so taken by the therapy that he traveled to Shunkoin-Temple in Kyoto, Japan, the following year to learn more and obtain his certification.

Once Mundell decided to offer the service, the next step involved properly and cautiously marketing it to clients. But his hard work paid off: "In three years, I've never had a negative response from any of my clients," he says, and attributes the success to his diligence in building trust by educating them about the therapy. "I always advise people to avoid Googling 'cupping'—especially images—it can really scare them," he laughs.

"I let clients know that they'll have round marks from the cups for several days because the cups are pulling red blood cells from their interstitial tissues and from old injuries. The pressure is breaking the capillaries as well, allowing the lymphatic system to take away those dead red blood cells and enabling controlled trauma. The process is sending endorphins, white blood cells and fluids to that area," says Mundell. "Also, I don't call cupping marks bruises. I call them cup kisses!"

Hammett reports that his clients appreciate cupping more than a typical deep tissue massage. "For many of the people I treat, the work they need done has previously been performed in a way that they felt 'beat up,' or simply sore and exhausted for several days," he explains. "Cupping lets them get the results they want, which last longer."

Maureen Walker, a massage therapist at The Spa at Four Seasons Hotel Las Vegas, has had similar reactions from her regular clientele. "When used in a series, the results of cupping are certainly cumulative, yet even in a single treatment, long term physical issues may be resolved," she explains.

For Hammett, cupping is excellent for his clients but it's beneficial for him too. "It can take some time to get a client comfortable enough to allow for deeper work. The cups cut right to the chase, and seem to have a more lasting effect," he reports. "They also do a fair amount of the work for me, which allows me a potentially longer career. Who wouldn't want that?"