

An Unusual Skin Allergy Post Wet Cupping

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ABSTRACT

Cupping is one of the oldest natural healing therapies worldwide and is well known as a complementary treatment and remains in use for many ailments, including dermatological conditions. Cupping involves applying a heated cup to generate a partial vacuum that mobilizes the blood flow and promotes effective healing. I report a case who presented with an interestingly allergic skin reaction post cupping on her back. Using search words of "cupping," "complication," and "skin allergy", did not yield any reports were found on PubMed. Therapeutic efficacy was claimed but not scientifically documented in these reports due to poor clinical evidence. I am reporting this case report for its exceptional presentation.

INTRODUCTION

Cupping is a form of complementary and alternative medicine (CAM)

that is used in the Muslim world, as well as in North Africa, the Far and Middle East, Eastern Europe and Latin America. It is proposed to be used initially by the ancient Egyptians, Greeks and Chinese and it is dated back to nearly 200 AD.

The technique involves the application of ignited alcohol-soaked cotton in a glass cup or jar. The container is then applied to the skin over the area of interest. The area of skin can either be left as is (dry cupping) or it may be scratched and otherwise incised with a sharp object, such as a knife (wet cupping).

The cup is left over the site and on cooling, generates a partial vacuum. This is said to draw "spoiled stagnant blood and toxins" and other "contaminants" as well as eliminating sluggish flow which manifest in the skin surface as a bruise. Moreover, cupping is performed over acupuncture spots in the belief that this stimulates the body's vital energy.

CLINICAL PRESENTATION

A healthy Libyan lady in her 30s presented with acute itchy red beefy, non scaly, non oozing skin lesions over her back, mainly over both shoulders girdles and lower mid back for the last three days (Figure 1, 2, and 3). She gave a history of wet cupping performed by a pious woman in a medical clinic, and was not her first time to have it done for a pain she has on her lower back. She claimed that the skin allergy developed straight away after the session and the only thing her medic applied was an olive oil as a moisturizer after the cupping session. She did not follow up on treatment though the call centre of the hospital called her many times to come for a follow-up, but never replied back and thus dropped out.

She was reporting bad backache and seeking complementary treatment (Figure 1), which resulted in multiple red, well-defined, rounded red skin lesions over the shoulders and lower mid back. She never came back for a follow up as instructed.

On examination, there are multiple red, blanchable erythematous, well-defined, rounded none oozing red skin lesions over both shoulders girdle and the lower mid back at the exact places where the cupping was applied. A punch 4 mm was taken and sent for histopathology which revealed findings coincides with sub-acute spongiotic dermatitis.

DISCUSSION

Cupping or Hijamaah is a term given ('Hijama' in Arabic is derived from 'hajm' which means 'sucking'), and is old modality of complementary treatment which is usually carried out by non medical individuals, such as village elders and “pious” men, who have learnt the technique from their ancestors, eventually passing it on to the next generation. Some claimed it is like the Chinese acupuncture where certain points should be triggered. It has been as well recommended by prophet Mohamed for its vast benefits.

Cupping therapy as a curative skill has been developed and applied throughout history and believed to be not an irritant to the skin. This therapy is considered to be relatively safe with no systemic reviews documenting negative side effects.

Cupping has a distinctive physical appearance: round areas of erythema which may become oedematous and ecchymotic due to capillary leak. In order to cover a larger surface area, the cup can be moved around over lubricated skin: this creates the effect of linear purpuric streaks. If the physician is not aware of this practice, these benign lesions can be mistaken for injuries seemingly inflicted through abuse.

Cupping can cause significant dermatological issues. The practice has been purported to induce Köebner phenomenon, commonly seen in cases of psoriasis^[1], as well as keloid formation at cupping sites^[2]. Cupping may also exacerbate eczematous areas^[3], and may trigger post inflammatory hyperpigmentation^[4], and skin burns locally^[5]. Additionally cupping found to lessen post-herpetic neuralgia through its influences on substance P^[6].

When cupping was utilized for non-specific neck and back pain, it was found to improve symptoms significantly. There is no definitive conclusion due to high dropout rates^[7].

Most of the RCTs in the existing literature demonstrated no serious adverse effects^[8].

This unique case cannot further explored or investigating due to lack of controlled studies on such cases, plus what the lady stated could be a mix up about her story and the application of the olive oil after that.

In the present case, this acute reaction could be explained as secondary to the cupping maneuver carried out itself (vigorous suction), breakage up of the skin capillary, an unexplained body immunological reaction toward the cupping, Olive oil and possibly other oils associated application ways, skin cutting technique, or simply due to the repeated cupping and trauma. Although no immunological tests were performed as no similar history of the incident was reported before in the existing literature, thus the exact cause remains mystery.

Searching however the existing literature did not yield a single case report about such a similar incident. Olive oil is well-known to be therapeutic for many ailments as prophet Mohamed said and as stated as well in the Holy Quran, and known to be safe on skin. So how this encountered incident happened remains a mystery to resolve. To the best of my knowledge, this is the first Libyan lady to be reported of such incident post wet cupping.

The argument here is that cupping can be used for treating eczema, atopy and contact dermatitis and what had happened in this case is contact dermatitis post cupping which mandate a careful consideration when such cases seeking such a therapy.

In conclusion, evidence based foundation is lacking and needs a robust research and controlled studies to affirm the claim. Also the benefits of cupping are difficult to analyse and interpret as there are



Figure 1 Whole back skin lesions revealing multiple cupping marks on the lady back.



Figure 2 A-close up lower back, shows bloodletting puncturing area.



Figure 3 Shoulder girdles skin lesions with typical cupping mark and central dark blue marks from the light knife cutting for blood to draw out.

no randomized control trials which prove or disprove its efficacy^[9].

Clinicians should also be attentive of diverse alternative treatment modalities and be prepared to offer evidence-based advice to the patients when needed in order to not miss such cases.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

The authors declare that they do not have conflict of interests.

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