Why is Cupping Popular with Athletes?

By Dr. Ramona Warren

Cupping has received a great deal of attention in the past few weeks mainly due to the gifted swimmer, Michael Phelps, who has won more Olympic medals than any other athlete. When Phelps first hit the pool deck in Rio with large purple circles on his shoulder, people immediately began asking, “What caused those huge bruises?”

The marks on Phelps’ shoulder are not actually bruises, but are referred to as “cup kisses,” resulting from a healing method called “cupping therapy.” Cupping has been practiced in China for thousands of years and has recently been gaining popularity in the west. Cupping was originally used to help draw blood and pus from boils. Through the years cupping has developed clinically and is now used for a variety of conditions. Both amateur and professional athletes utilize cupping to help improve strength, reduce recovery time, reduce pain, increase energy and enhance performance.

Athletes aren’t the only ones to use cupping. Several celebrities including Gwyneth Paltrow, Jennifer Aniston and Justin Bieber have been seen with “cup kisses” on their bodies. Cupping therapy is used for a wide range of conditions, including:

* + Arthritis
  + Joint stiffness
  + Tight and contracted muscles
  + Pain reduction
  + Reduce blood pressure
  + Pre- and post- operative therapy to reduce recovery time
  + Scar reduction
  + Lymphatic drainage
  + Detoxification
  + Indigestion
  + Asthma
  + Colds
  + Skin toning and firming

There are two types of cupping therapy: wet and dry. Both types use small cups (ranging in size from 1 to 3 inches) that are placed on the body over specific points. Dry cupping is most common and involves heating the cups, which are typically made of glass, plastic or silicone. The hot cups are placed on the patient, sealed off and held in place for five to 10 minutes. Several cups may be placed at the same time. As the air inside the cup cools, a vacuum is created, and the patient’s skin is pulled into the cup. This causes the blood vessels below the skin to dilate. Sometimes the therapist may move the cups, gliding them along the patient’s skin to help relax areas of tension in the muscles. Dry cupping can also be performed with a suction pump. The purpose of dry cupping is to remove blood and fluid from an area that is inflamed.

Wet cupping, also known as blood letting, involves a small incision on the skin where the cup is applied or the use of small pricking needles. The purpose of this type of cupping is to draw out superficial blood that is believed to be toxic. This type of cupping is more common in the Middle East.

Cupping is believed to work by increasing the blood circulation and lymphatic flow, and activating the immune system, which speeds healing. The suction created by the cups helps loosen and lift rigid connective tissue. Stagnant toxins are pulled up to the skin, increasing the flow of blood and lymph to the skin and muscles. Cupping improves oxygen flow and nutrients to the tissue. It is also believed the suction from the cups impacts the parasympathetic nervous system, which has a calming effect on the body. Many people report feeling deeply relaxed up to several days following treatment.

The side effects of cupping are minor and include swelling, slight burning, and the circular discolorations (cup kisses). Although they look like bruises, the marks are said to be the result of internal toxins that are being pulled up to the skin. The discoloration can be more dramatic when there are more toxins that have become stagnant in the tissues. If an injury has never fully healed, more scar tissue will develop along with poor circulation leading to increased toxicity in the area. Those with chronic injuries can expect increased discoloration.

There are several studies that support the benefits of cupping, especially for the reduction of musculoskeletal pain. One study done in 2012 compared cupping to Progressive Muscle Relaxation (PMR). The researchers found that people with chronic neck pain that utilized cupping had reduced pain and scored higher on measurements of well-being after 12 weeks of treatment.

Another study found cupping benefited patients who suffered with arthritis of the knee. After four months of cupping, they experienced less pain than the control group that received no treatment.

Some people, including Olympic gymnast Alexander Naddour, get their own do-it-yourself cupping kits. Naddour told USA Today that he purchased his own kit and said, “It’s been better than any money I’ve spent on anything else.” One of the chiropractors for the United States swim team, Kevin Rindal, who works on Michael Phelps, says that the cupping device they use can be purchased on Amazon for about $30.

Although cupping kits are easy to come by, it doesn't necessarily mean you should start doing your own cupping. It is best to find an experienced practitioner. Several types of health practitioners such as doctors of Chinese medicine, acupuncturists, massage therapists, nurses, physical therapists and chiropractors may be trained in cupping.

Cupping has been used for thousands of years by many different cultures. Its benefits of increased immune function, increased strength and energy far outweigh any risks. If there were great risks to cupping, you can be sure the Olympic athletes would not be wearing “cup kisses.”