

# CUPPING THERAPY

## SUMMER OLYMPIC 2016 STYLE TREATMENTS



Michael Phelps Cupping Therapy Starts An Olympic Trend

We've all been watching the non-stop coverage of the 2016 Rio Olympics. You heard about the winners, the losers and the amazing feats of physical athleticism. But what is even bigger than Michael Phelps 23<sup>rd</sup> gold medal? What is the hottest talk about these days in the rehabilitation world? The answer is, 'Cupping!'

Athletes work on their bodies non-stop. Preparation for an event of this nature, game day performance and then cool down and maintenance of your fitness level can take a lot out of you. We live in a very physical world and even our jobs require us to maintain some level of fitness in order to get through the day unscathed

and to prevent injuries. We often think of the athletes as the ones needing all that treatment, but your day to day job can lead to a lot of overuse and strain that might need some TLC. Anyone doing anything is going to need some treatment at some point through regular use of their bodies.

**Myofascial Decompression (MFD)**, otherwise known in **Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) as 'cupping'** is all the rage right now. It is on every news channel and is going viral on social media. It leaves its mark so that it shows that you were the lucky recipient of this new hottest technique. So what is it exactly and why would you wear those bruises so proudly?

TCM focuses on 'chi' or energy pathways (meridians) in the body. Cupping is used to help the body and organ systems operate and feel better by unblocking stagnant chi along the meridians. An area of stagnation along the meridian correlates with some sort of organ or system dysfunction. So, the darker the color under the cup, the better as that means it is unblocking and moving energy into that area of dysfunction to help heal it. MFD has turned TCM into a western form of medicine. MFD incorporates this type of treatment, but also focuses on the more anatomical aspects of the human body.

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MFD targets mechanical connective tissue change, trigger points, myofascial tissue, scars and postural issues. It also incorporates movements patterns and neuromuscular re-education. The goals of MFD are to release soft tissues, reorganize the soft tissues, restore movement, improve circulation and reduce your perception of pain.

MFD involves the use of cups (glass, silicone or plastic), a hand held pneumatic pump (TCM uses a flame/heat/lighter), and instrument assisted soft tissue mobilization (buffalo horn, metal, or plastic).

The cups are placed on the skin with a negative pressure which allows them to pull up on the underlying skin. This is the 'decompressive' nature of the treatment as it creates a lift and reduces the pressure of the tight overlying tissues. Superficial blood vessels might break and you are drawing fluids to the area, hence the 'bruising' effect.

It is not always necessary however as it depends on the assessment of what you need and the application of the cups. Again, TCM goes for the bruising after-effect; MFD goes for fascial reorganization and restoration of movement.

There are multiple types of application for MFD. Techniques of application are: static, gliding and with range of motion. As physical therapists you need to assess patients' condition and trial a technique on them. The findings of your evaluation will determine what type of application would work best.

After application of the cups, the treatment concludes with flushing the area of the excess fluids using instrument assisted soft tissue mobilization. Icing is also refrained for up to 2 hours after receiving this type of treatment.



Cupping marks can last up to 7-10 days so make sure to gain agreement from your client before performing this therapy. The area just inside the cup and around the rim generate the highest forces so application can be painful, but it does not necessarily have to be.

Neuromuscular re-education must occur after receiving this type of treatment, especially if you do MFD with a range of motion activity. You will restore mobility and reduce pain so you must retrain movement patterns and restore stability in the area.

TCM use of 'cupping' has been around for thousands of years. With the popularity of its use in the Olympics, there is sure to be an uptick in continuing education seminars, treatments and research. Although there is not a lot of evidence yet, the treatment has already been around for several years and is in use in rehabilitation clinics.

Similar to the 2008 Olympics, kinesiology tape gained significant popularity for mainstream use and there was an increase in education seminars (still with a lack of solid evidence) after being seen on athletes at those games.

Clearly, MFD has been approved for use by the US Olympic Training Centers and just like kinesiology taping, it will probably continue on the path that kinesiology taping traveled on. Either way, it does feel better afterwards so if your perception of pain goes down and you believe it works, it will probably be the next lasting new age treatment to be found in rehabilitation clinics around the world.