

A hickey for your health?

Fans such as Gwyneth Paltrow insist cupping improves blood flow and soothes muscles -- but is it worth the bruising? ALEXANDRA GILL tries a hot glass treatment

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ALEXANDRA GILL

I thought the bruises would transform me into a celebrity-styled conversation piece, but I felt more like a diseased social pariah. After a recent cupping session, I traipsed through a cocktail party for the Vancouver International Film Festival, wearing a halter top that clearly revealed a dozen, perfectly round contusions across my back from neck to waist.

I do not recommend this as a way to make friends and influence important people.

"Eeew!" one acquaintance cried, staring in gape-mouthed horror at the fresh, armadillo-sized hickies, rapidly deepening into angry shades of blue and purple.

Although I assured anyone who got close enough to ask that the marks didn't hurt a bit -- on the contrary, I felt relaxed and revitalized -- no one believed me. Even my boyfriend was reluctant to stand by my side. "People are going to think I beat you," he said.

Come on, you West Coast hoi polloi. This was supposed to be my Gwyneth Paltrow moment. Two years ago, the actress caused a tabloid sensation when she appeared at a New York film premiere in a low-cut dress that revealed similar circular bruises on her upper back.

At the time, a few wags suggested that maybe she and Chris Martin, her rock star hubbie, liked it rough in the sack. But, as Ms. Paltrow explained to Oprah Winfrey, the marks were the result of a traditional Chinese treatment that uses heated glass cups to create a mechanical suction on the skin, drain excess fluids and toxins from deep muscle tissue and improve blood flow.

Commonly known as cupping, but sometimes described as middle-class leeching, the healing therapy also claims Cate Blanchett, Ralph Fiennes and Kate Moss among its devotees. But it's more than just a celebrity fad. Cupping has been used by acupuncturists in China since the third century BC, when cups were fashioned out of animal horns.

It is believed that cupping followed the silk traders out of China, through the Middle East and into Europe. Today, in war-torn Baghdad, there have been reports of ill and injured civilians seeking cupping, or Hijamma, because the hospital system there is such a mess.

In the West, the procedure is used to treat a wide range of conditions, including constipation, pesky cellulite, chronic depression and serious sports injuries. Australian pop singer Kylie Minogue reportedly used it to ease relieve the discomfort of chemotherapy.

My reasons for cupping were far less dire. I was introduced to traditional Chinese medicine three years ago, when I wrote about British Columbia becoming the first province in Canada to confer it with professional status. To illustrate the story, I gave facial acupuncture (an anti-wrinkle cosmetic treatment) a spin.

Since then, whenever I'm feeling stressed, I race to my acupuncturist for a quick, prickly fix. **Tahmineh** Nikookar doesn't just poke me with needles, though. Her treatments include hands-off energy work, herbs and cranial sacral massage.

After she removes the acupuncture needles, she may also take a glass, bell-shaped cup, ignite a cotton ball soaked with alcohol, swirl the flame in the cup (to remove the oxygen), plunk it on my oiled-down back to create a vacuum on my skin and gently glide it all over.

Oh, it's pure bliss. The suction mimics the rolling action of a deep-tissue massage, without any of the discomfort. And it doesn't bruise if the cup keeps moving.

Then one day, about two months ago, I woke up with a knot in my neck that was so tight I could barely move my head from side to side. I made an emergency appointment with Dr. Nikookar, who promptly pulled out two cups. They were bigger than the ones she usually uses. And she didn't glide them around this time. She suctioned them onto either side of my neck and left them there for about 15 minutes.

I felt a slight tingling as my skin bulged under the cups and filled with blood rushing to the surface. "It will remove the blockages from your meridians and help the *qi* start flowing again," she said, referring to the life energies that travel along invisible channels in the body.

When I stood up, my neck felt so loose and limber I could have done yoga. I was, mind you, a bit shocked by the two round marks on the back of my neck that were already turning a ripe shade of plum.

"Sometimes I have to wear a high collar if I don't want people asking where I got the hickeys," says Heather James, another client of Dr. Nikookar's.

Ms. James first tried cupping 10 years ago in Alberta, while recovering from a serious car accident that had left her with whiplash and a broken vertebrae tip. "My muscles were so tense and stiff, a regular massage couldn't get down to the knot," she explains.

An active athlete, Ms. James now goes for acupuncture and cupping once a month, to keep her body nimble. "It's so relaxing, I usually fall asleep," she says.

Lisa Skerritt also uses cupping -- combined with acupuncture -- to treat sports injuries at the Solarice Wellness Centre + Spa in Whistler, B.C.

"[Cupping] can enhance athletic performance by bringing blood flow to stagnant skin and muscles, loosening adhesions, lifting connective tissue and stimulating the peripheral nervous system," she explains. "It's the best deep-tissue massage available."

It also helps the mind, Dr. Skerritt says, noting that she used it to treat victims of sexual abuse and people suffering from alcohol and drug addictions when she worked at a clinic in Vancouver's Downtown Eastside.

"People who have been sexually abused are reluctant to be touched. Acupuncture and cupping are less invasive than massage, and you don't have to take all your clothes off. And because it has a strong effect on brain chemicals and serotonin, it can really help people who are depressed but might not want to do psychotherapy."

As it becomes more popular in standard spa settings, however, cupping is probably better known for its more superficial effects. The Suddenly Slimmer Day Spa in Phoenix uses cupping in combination with skin wrapping for its "bye-bye belly jelly" cellulite treatment.

Some spas in the U.S. are also offering cupping facelifts with miniature suction cups. And I guess if you compare the bruising from cupping with that caused by surgery, the ancient Chinese procedure is much less inconvenient.

"In my 15 years of practice, I have treated very few patients who were concerned about the bruising," Dr. Skerritt says. "Most people seem to enjoy the conversation piece that they become."

That was my hope. But back at the film festival party, I seemed to be scaring off more people than I attracted. Finally, near the end of the night, someone recognized the marks and realized that I wasn't contagious.

"That looks a lot better than most of the cupping I've seen," said Kate Colley Lo, communications director for Top Table Restaurants. Admiring the symmetrical pattern of my bruising, she added: "You've been artfully decorated."

Hmm -- decorative bruising. Maybe if I prance around with these marks long enough, I'll start a new trend. At the very least, my back will feel fabulous as I try.