What is gua sha?
Gua sha is the ancient Chinese medical technique of using the hard edge of a tool to apply pressure in a scraping motion in order to break up muscular and fascial tension, stimulating blood flow and increased circulation to the area. Tools for gua sha are typically made of: metal, such as stainless steel; bone, such as buffalo horn; or stone, such as quartz or jade. A liquid medium, such as water or oil, is used to protect the skin and facilitate fluid movement of the tool against the skin. The word “gua” represents the scraping motion, and the word “sha” represents the visible healing response produced by the body in the form of discoloration, redness, bruising, or petechiae (tiny dark round spots).

How is gua sha used in treatment?
Gua sha can be used to release fascial entrapment and adhesions, relieving musculoskeletal pain and tension, and improve circulation and blood flow to the area promoting downstream healing effects to other areas of the body. For example, gua sha may be used to treat:

- muscle tension
- pain
- local inflammation
- respiratory issues
- asthma
- bronchitis
- flu
- and colds.

How does gua sha heal the body?
Similar to the ancient Chinese technique of cupping, gua sha stimulates the parasympathetic nervous system, relaxing the body and triggering the immune system to generate a healing response (namely through the extravasation of white blood cells from the capillaries and the proliferation of endogenous anti-inflammatory substances such as cytokines); this response helps clear toxins and prevent illness by moving blood and lymphatic fluid, bringing nutrients to the surface, regenerating tissue, and hydrating muscle fascia. Proper cellular communication occurs when blood and lymphatic fluid move freely without obstruction. When there is obstruction, cellular communication breaks down, disease sets in, and eventually manifests in the form of symptoms. Because the body is a system of interrelated parts requiring communication to function, gua sha of one area can stimulate downstream healing effects to the entire body.

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Commonly Asked Questions About Gua Sha

What can I expect to feel during gua sha?

What you feel during gua sha will vary based on the areas of and level of applied pressure. You will feel pressure and scraping, likely followed by a sense of release. Communication with your practitioner during treatment is important. Occasional and slight discomfort may occur during treatment, but this is only temporary and will be relative to your level of sensitivity and the level of pressure applied by the practitioner. Let your practitioner know if the level of pressure should be increased or decreased based on your sensitivity; your practitioner should consider your level of comfort while also communicating the therapeutic benefit of applying certain degrees of pressure to certain areas. Relax and breathe deeply during treatment to facilitate healing response.

When should I expect after gua sha?

You should expect to feel a sense of general relaxation often accompanied by increased mobility and flexibility in the areas treated. Results may set in immediately or gradually up to 72hrs after treatment. Because cupping stimulates a healing response through capillary extravasation and the loosening of fibrous tension, soreness, redness, bruising, and petechiae are likely to occur; do not be alarmed, this is evidence of the body's healing response. Soreness should dissipate within 24-72hrs. Areas of discoloration may be present for approximately 48hrs to 2 weeks.

Cautions and considerations:

- Keep area covered from exposure to wind and extreme temperatures for at least 24 hrs.
- Drink plenty of water following the treatment to aid in detoxification.
- Plan ahead: if you do not want temporary bruising or marks present for any reason (e.g., planned events, weddings, etc.) consider the timing of your appointment.
- Wait for areas of discoloration to heal before cupping the same location.

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