

Circular areas of erythema on the mid forehead

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Abstract

Cupping is well known as a complementary treatment and remains in use for many ailments, including dermatological conditions. We report a case who presented with a skin lesion on her forehead.

Keywords: cupping, complementary medicine, alternative medicine, skin.

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. 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 blood” and other “contaminants” as well as eliminating sluggish flow. Moreover, cupping is performed over acupuncture spots in the belief that this stimulates the body's vital energy.

Clinical presentation

Initially presenting in view of hand eczema, a middle-aged lady was noted to have particular skin findings on her forehead. She was not concerned about the latter; she was reporting headaches and seeking complementary treatment (Figure 1). This resulted in a single, well-defined, rounded red skin lesion over the mid-forehead, with some ecchymosis at the lower edge. This resolved over a one week period with no treatment or intervention.

Discussion

Cupping is an 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.

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 psoriasis¹, as well as keloid formation at cupping sites². Cupping may also exacerbate eczematous areas³, and may trigger post inflammatory hyperpigmentation⁴. Additionally cupping was found to lessen post-herpetic neuralgia through its influences on substance P⁵.

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 rates⁶.

In conclusion, the benefits of cupping are difficult to analyse as there are no randomized control trials which prove or disprove its efficacy.

Figure 1: Mid forehead rounded skin lesion



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Case Report

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