

GUA SHA

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- Introduction to Gua Sha: History and Theory
- Basic Functions, Uses, and Actions
- Cautions and Contraindications
- Safety and Disinfection
- Legal Considerations (Cautions, Contraindications, and Informed Consent)
- Introduction to Gua Sha Methods
- Gua Sha Techniques
- Gua Sha Usage

Supplies

Gua Sha Portion:

1. Gua Sha tool
2. Oil or lubricant
3. Disinfection tools
4. Paper towel

Suggested reading material:

<https://www.healthtraditions.com.au/essays/gua-sha-lantern-4-2.html>

Course Outline:

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Introduction to Gua Sha - History, Theory and Safety

History

The theory of strengthening resistance in Chinese Medicine stems back to the early times of ancient medicine, where we can witness the creation of such texts as the Yellow Emperor's Classic in China, and the Ebers Papyrus in Egypt. It only makes sense that this information exchange occurred during the exchange of goods, including medicine along the long course of the Silk Road.

It was accepted that the conditions of the time had a tendency to be quite extreme, and that two pathogens could not exist in the body at one time. This in itself displays the shift that has occurred in the human condition, as we see now in clinical practice our patients arriving with multiple complaints, and a slew of medications to treat them. Hippocrates believed that the 'cause of disease should be sought in nature, the cure due to nature.' Chinese Medicine Doctors also saw humans as a microcosm of nature, and that we were one with the cosmos. Humans were but a small portion of the bigger picture.

This theory of strengthening resistance was popular until the last century, when the idea of counteraction became popular. This again was developed under the premise that only one disease could exist in the body at a time, therefore by introducing a new pathogen, the body would be forced to face an artificial crisis, and this would accelerate healing. This initiated the practice of deliberately applying a counteractive technique to activate the body's healing response. In early Western medicine, infections were being treated by applying surface agents to induce inflammation and rashes.



A common counteractive practice in the west was to apply a seton to the back of the neck. This is where the skin is pinched and a fiber or hair was threaded into the

flesh. The intent was that the surface infection would cause a mild infection that would counteract a deeper infection. In this image, the patient has a chronic running eye sore.

Galen believed that the reason that counteractive techniques worked was that the secondary irritation drew blood away from the original injury site, thus reducing inflammation.

In 1841, Granville discusses counteraction as the direction of fluids in the following statement:

Where a force has been used to direct fluids to a particular region of the body, with a view to relieve another region of the body labouring under disease. We have affected that object by merely changing the location of those fluids.

Expulsion of fluids at the surface of the body, as in perspiration associated with a fever was a natural counteraction. Sweating acts as a counteractive method to draw fluids to the surface of the body.

It can be said that Gua sha is a **counteractive** method used to induce an artificial crisis, resolving the inner disease by countering the internal inflammation.

Frictioning methods went as far back as Hippocratic medicine. Anatriptlogy was the scientific consideration for the use of friction for remedial purposes. *Frictio* is the root of the word *fricare* which means to rub along a surface with pressure, to grate, chafe, stress, or irritate.

The Chinese character for sha is translated as “reddish elevated, millet-like skin rashes. The ideogram for sha is the radical for sickness joined by the radical for sand, or ‘that which appears when water decreases’ Gua sha was used in Asia to treat cholera, and cholera like disorders, and basically any disorder involving fever or pain, unless contraindicated. Symptoms such as fever, vomiting, diarrhea, dehydration, and cramps.

Gua sha was first taught in the west at the New England School of Acupuncture (NESA) in 1976.

Gua Sha Theory

Gua Sha is a traditional East Asian Medicine technique that applies instrument- assisted unidirectional 'press-stroking' of a lubricated area of the body surface to intentionally create transitory therapeutic petechiae representing extravasation of blood in the subcutis.

(Nelson, 2013)

Gua Sha induces a crisis to cure the disease. It relieves inflammation and congestion of blood internally by counteraction at the surface.

Sha

Sha is a term that describes the presence of surface Blood Stasis or petechiae that is associated with pain or sickness, or the result of applying Gua Sha. Sha may be symptomatic (sha Syndrome) asymptomatic, or mildly symptomatic and potentially pathogenic.(cholera)

Gua sha is indicated to treat the following conditions:

- Fever, bronchitis, asthma, respiratory infection, cough, throat infection
- Mastitis
- Autoimmune disorders such as rheumatoid arthritis and lupus
- Musculoskeletal disorders such as frozen shoulder, neck pain, tennis elbow, lumbar disc issue, soft tissue injury
- Facial paralysis, head and face neuralgia
- Skin problems
- Cardiovascular problems
- Digestive problems, pediatric diarrhea
- Stress, insomnia, chronic fatigue
- Hepatitis

Gua Sha Functions, Uses, and Actions

We often translate the word 'Qi' from Chinese into the English language by describing it as energy. This does not even come close to the full embodiment of Qi. If we were to consider Qi as 'vital energy' it would be much closer, as Qi incorporates not only the substance 'energy' but also the action that is required in body function (movement or vibration). The idea of 'vital energy' implies that there is some kind of dynamic action that is at play, which is exactly what the concept of Qi should be understood as. The Yin aspect of Qi would be its substance, as in the body, and the Yang aspect of Qi would be its action because as we know, Qi is active in nature.

The **connective tissue** surrounds and anchors all of the structures in the body, including but not exclusive to the bone, venous system, muscle, and organs. There are many layers of connective tissue down to a cellular level, and it is what sustains our form. Contemporary medicine has now identified the connective tissue as its own organ system (the mesentarium), and we would most closely attribute it to the San Jiao in TCM. For this discussion we will focus on the fascia, which is the connective tissue that binds and supports in compartments that aid in supporting the skeleton, muscles and organs to maintain their structural integrity.

Connective tissue is filled with a clear viscous fluid called ground substance. The viscosity varies depending on that tissues it is supporting, but it is the conductor of all intercellular fluids. Nutrients, hormones, and plasma are all carried from blood vessels to cells through ground substance, and cellular waste is carried from cells to blood and lymph vessels. When the viscosity of ground substance is affected by stress, trauma, dehydration, or disuse, the circulation and passage of ground substance is compromised. Collagen fibers and fibroblast cells are also contained within ground substance.

- Collagen comprises up to 40% of all the protein in the body The collagen molecule that makes up a collagen fibril is the longest molecule ever isolated, is hollow, and require 10,000 times their own weight to be stretched
- Fibroblasts produce other ground substance and collagen, and may migrate anywhere in the body
- A more fluid ground substance with fewer fibrils conducts more easily and provides a metabolic function
- Connective tissue that holds organ and nerve cells contain more fiber and less fluid

- The compartments of connective tissue influences the spread of toxins, infections, disease and tumors, implicating connective tissue in immunity
 - The fibrous walls as well as chemicals in the ground substance prevent the spread of agents from one site to a nearby one
 - If the integrity of the connective tissue is compromised, its immune function declines
- (Juhan 1987)

The layers of connective tissue each have slightly different purposes, and their properties also vary. The superficial fascia is where the main fatty tissue or adipose tissue acts as an insulating layer on the exterior of the body and the organs. The deep layer of the superficial fascia contains that arteries, veins, nerves, and lymph. The deep level of fascia holds that muscles, large blood vessels, large nerves, deep lymphatics, and certain glands. Another category of connective tissue is the unspecialized connective tissue. It has been suggested that the loose connective tissue function as the transmitter of mechanical signals to and from the immune, vascular, and neural cells in the body. (Latridis et al 2003) Connective tissue plays an important role in the distribution of fluids and in the bodys' water metabolism.

Actions

What one sees when applying Gua Sha is a gradual reddening of the tissues, expressed as petechiae. Sometimes the colour will appear darker, in a brown, gray, blue or black tone.

The patient usually feels invigorated or energized. Acute pain usually changes immediately, and is sometimes completely resolved.

The application of multidirectional force and stretch are thought to cause restoration in the connective tissue and its innervations, but only to certain kinds of connective tissue. Results vary based on intention, pressure, duration of application, repetition, other therapeutic interventions etc...

In a study performed to study the microcirculatory effects of gua sha on the skin and subcutis to demonstrate the circulatory and pain relieving mechanism of gua sha it was demonstrated that changes were found in microcirculation and myalgia on patients. Within the first 7.5 minutes of treatment, there was a fourfold increase in microcirculation and a significant increase in microcirculation remained 25 minutes after the treatment has ceased. Each test subject experience significant decreases in

myalgia both locally and distally, and pain relief persisted after treatment in some cases until the follow up visit. The conclusion was that there is an unidentified pain relieving mechanism associated with gua sha.

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/17905355>

3 main characteristics of Gua Sha:

- 1) Closely repeated uni-directional stroking that intentionally presses into the fascia
 - 2) Application is predominantly along a muscle and specifically not oscillating or across muscle tissue
 - 3) The intentional creation of transitional petechiae and ecchymosis
- (Nelson, 2013)

Instrument Assisted Soft Tissue Release (IASTM)

The popularity of modifying ancient practices by removing the concepts that relate to Traditional Medicine and applying the therapeutic understanding of the procedures to current medical treatments is impressive. In my opinion is an acknowledgement of the efficacy of these practices, however it is often undermined by the same institutions that create the modifications in order to justify the 'scientific reasoning' which has always existed in cohesion with Traditional Medicine though not always fully observed or explained in English or Latin terminology. By merging the two ideologies together, practitioners can gain the benefit of comprehending the ancient context and principles of these methodologies supported by modern scientific resources.

IASTM is most commonly used to relieve stubborn fascial restrictions and scar tissue to resolve adhesions, decrease pain, and increase range of motion.

Using these tools creates an advantage over manual therapy due to the hard surface of the tools ability to apply deeper penetration and more specific treatment to the affected area without further stress on the body of the practitioner. IASTM claims to promote connective tissue remodelling through the resorption of excess fibrosis as well as inducing repair and regeneration of collagen fibre. This results in the breakdown of scar tissue, adhesions, and fascial restriction.

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC5039777/>

Gua Sha Tools

Historically, any smooth edged tool was acceptable. Common soup spoons and coins were often used as well as instruments created out of jade, animal horns, but any smooth edge will work.

Horns

There is an energetic significance to the materials that the tools are made from. The favoured traditional material to use for a gua sha tool was an animal horn. They were hard like bone, and very cooling in nature. Animal horns are also beneficial because they are made from biomineralized tissues like we have in our own bodies.

Stones - there are many different tools that gua sha (IASTM) tools can be made from.

Jade is said to be the most cooling stone, and therefore it can have a deeply therapeutic effect on inflammatory tissue. It has very low thermal conductivity and non-porous. Jade is also considered to be the stone of the fountain of youth.

Rose quartz is closely related to the heart, and has anti-stress and calming properties which is why it is the preferred stone for applying gua sha to the face although jade is also a good choice. It is said that rose quartz reduces stress and tension in the heart, and unlocking and healing old emotions so it can also be a good choice for upper back head and neck tension.

Stainless steel

Cooling in nature, non-porous, and is magnetic. The properties of stainless steel tools make it a good choice for very stiff, tight and inflexible areas.

Plastic

Inexpensive and do not break easily however they are durable, porous and not safe to properly disinfect. It is recommended that if you are using plastic tools you use them only for self-treatment and do not share with others.

As important as the materials that the tools are made from are the shape of the tools. If you are working on contours of the body, you want the tool to fit well with the contours to apply an even pressure. If you wish to apply localized pressure, than a tool with a rounded side is beneficial. The edges of the tools are also important. Check for snags or rough areas that could break or injure the skin. If the edge is too smooth, it may not achieve the desired result either.

It is necessary to lubricate the skin with oil or lotion, and important to check for sensitivities or allergies.

Cautions and Contraindications

General Safety

- Gua Sha is not a sterile procedure. Instruments must be cleaned and disinfected after each patient use.
- Instruments used on intact skin is a non-critical item and should be cleaned and disinfected with a low- level disinfectant between patients. (according to OMH, recent studies show otherwise)
- Instruments used on non-intact skin (e.g., used with needling) is a semi-critical item and should be cleaned and disinfected with an intermediate-level disinfectant between patients.

WE RECOMMEND ALWAYS USING HIGH LEVEL DISINFECTION BASED ON THE FOLLOWING RESEARCH

https://www.researchgate.net/publication/230618726_Safety_protocols_for_Gua_sha_press-s troking_and_Baguan_cupping

Contraindications

- Skin wounds, including blisters, sunburn, warts, moles, pimples, acne, open sores and cuts, shingles, rashes, herpes outbreaks (near them, not on them)
- Geriatric patients (loose skin, thin skin, tear and bruise easily).
- Weak patients or those who have been very ill
- Patients who has difficulty healing wounds (i.e. immunocompromised)
- Pregnancy (contraindicated over the abdomen, and lower back)
- Recent injury where there is bruising or abrasion (cupping or gua sha marks are contraindicated until the marks have healed)

Caution should be taken in the following cases:

- Diabetics, especially those with uncontrolled blood sugar, diabetic neuropathy
- Those who are unable to perceive heat or pain properly
- Those who have circulatory conditions
- Those who are unsure if their condition is contraindicated should seek guidance from their primary care physician prior to receiving cupping therapy or gua sha.
- Malignant Tumors
- Use over major arteries and cautioned over large blood vessels
- Hemophilia or other bleeding/clotting disorders
- Patients taking blood thinners

Introduction to Gua Sha Methods

'Gua Sha is a traditional East Asian Medicine technique that applies instrument-assisted unidirectional 'press-stroking' of a lubricated area of body surface to intentionally create transitory therapeutic petechiae representing extravasation of blood in the subcutis' (Nielson, 2013)

Coining or scraping has been used for centuries in Asia by Acupuncturists, and as a home remedy.

Gua

Gua literally means to scrape or scratch, but is more accurately described as unidirectional movement. Gua sha and Ba Guan (cupping) have similar therapeutic intentions but different mechanisms. Whether a practitioner chooses Gua sha or Ba guan comes down to personal preference. (Nielson 2013)

Sha

Sha is a term that describes the presence of surface blood stasis associated with pain or sickness and the petechiae that are raised from applying Gua Sha. Sha may be symptomatic (sha syndrome), asymptomatic, or mildly symptomatic and potentially pathogenic. The literal translation of sha is 'sand', 'sharkskin' or 'red, raised, millet-size rash' (Nielson 2013)

In ancient medical texts, sha refers to cholera, as sha resembles the end stage rash of the disease. This links Gua sha to its historical connection with treating fever and cholera.

The raised bumps found with the sha reaction are usually red but can be blue, purple or black. The colour indicated in the sha reaction indicates the condition in the body

Bright red indicates heat, Wind Heat or recent penetration

Pale red indicates Blood Deficiency

Dark red indicates intense heat and stasis

Purple or black indicates Blood Stasis (black is very old stasis)

Blue indicates Cold Stagnation or heart problems

Brown indicates Yin deficiency and is sometimes seen in diabetes

Yellow pigmentation is normal to sha fading and indicates bilirubin and biliverdin

When to check for sha

The body's surface connective tissue is a huge membrane where there are electrical, cellular, and mechanical forces constantly giving off signals. This signalling network is getting more and more research to discover what Traditional Medicine has known for over 2000 years. The connective tissue system is the transmitter for ordinary sensory awareness and it is instrumental in our health. Stagnation at this level limits movement and communication, and can indicate stagnation on a deeper level. Where there is pain, you can always suspect sha. Gua sha may partially or fully resolve a problem, it will almost always help. Gua sha also provides helpful diagnostic information.

How to check for sha

When palpating the body for pain and trigger points, press with several fingers slowly and deeply into the tissues. Quickly release the pressure and observe the reaction. If the tissue is slow to fade to normal flesh colour it indicates there is an obstruction in the flow of Qi and Blood.

If a patient complains of pain that is relieved with massage, but returns quickly after this is an indication of sha. If the patient wakes with sudden pain or stiffness, wakes with a kink or reports pain that comes and goes, they will almost always have sha.

How to apply Gua sha

- Gua sha is applied in repeated, closely timed unidirectional strokes over a lubricated area of the body.
- After palpation, identify an area to be treated and apply lubricant
- Place the smooth edged instrument just above the area to be treated. This instrument should be at a low angle to the skin.
- Move down the area with moderate pressure, pressing the smooth edge into the flesh.
 - If the stroke is toward the provider, the extended thumb makes contact with the flesh, and the fingers apply pressure to the front of the instrument. If the stroke is away from the provider, the bent fingers make contact with the flesh in front of the instrument. This method diffuses the sensation of the Gua sha instrument.
- Apply 6-15 strokes to raise sha. It can take as little as 4 strokes, or more than 15 depending on the depth of sha and the pressure used. Lighter pressure may require more strokes.
- This technique should not cause pain to the client, though it may be slightly uncomfortable when the sha is near complete expression.
 - A stroke should only be 4-6 inches (10-15cm) long
 - Strokes are repeated at a stroke line raising the sha before moving to an adjacent line.
 - The direction of the strokes should always start above, or distal to the area of treatment

Gua sha intentionally creates transitory therapeutic petechiae and ecchymosis. All of the petechiae will gradually blend into areas of ecchymosis. There is little or no discomfort in this technique if applied correctly. One mistake that students and beginners of gua sha often make is that they typically do not apply enough pressure or repeat strokes frequently enough to fully raise the sha. Even after petechiae begins to appear, one must continue in the stroke line until all of the sha is up. You will know all of the sha is up when continued strokes no longer increase the number of petechiae or change the colour of them.

Then there are the students who over-stroke, applying too much pressure or too many strokes, resulting in excess ecchymosis. It takes practice to find the middle place where the treatment is effective and pain free.

The Gua sha lines should not match meridian lines, nor should they produce stripes. This is a sign of incomplete or improper technique. The finished picture should be that of an area that appears to

be completely painted.

The effect of Gua sha does not signify bruising. Bruising represents damage to an area of tissue due to a blow of external force. In this case, the blood escapes the vessels and creates a random pattern which takes several days to heal and changes colour from red to purple, blue, brown, green and yellow over the days that it takes to heal. Transitory therapeutic petechiae simply fades in one to three days, if correctly applied. This is a representation of the function within the superficial circulatory bed, and the removal of extravasted blood and the resulting inflammatory and immune stimulation. (Nielson 2013)

Gua Sha Techniques

Sequence of Gua Sha strokes

As with most modalities, there is a recommended sequence and direction that we perform Gua Sha

It is recommended to start distal to the area of pain, and work toward the focal area

Start close to the spine, and work toward the extremities being the final areas of treatment

Begin at the top of the body, and work downwards

Gua sha should be applied along the course of the muscles.

After Treatment

It is important to have clear communication with your patient before, during and after treatment.

The effects of gua sha could be traumatizing to patients, so they need to clearly understand before the session that the results of gua sha will appear similar to bruising. Make sure you tell your patients that you can stop at any time, and continue checking in during the session. Palpate the area after treatment, and gently massage the area to check for changes and tenderness as well as to assist in circulation. It is advised to show the patient the results of their Gua sha treatment so that they are not frightened by the reddening of their tissues. Patients can also have an emotional reaction to the healing process, so try to hold a compassionate space for them.

Gua Sha Treatment

Gua Sha in Colds or Flu

At the onset of a cold or flu, Gua sha may prevent further respiratory symptoms.

If applied in the middle of the illness, fever or pain may intensify and then decline within 24-48 hours

If Gua sha is applied at the end stages of an acute illness where there is no longer a fever, but assessment and palpation indicate residual pathogenic heat and sha, Gua sha clears what is left and is comforting and lifting. There should be no worsening of symptoms.

Acute pain

More associated with Excess syndrome, and will demonstrate darker colour. The darker the Blood, the longer the condition has existed. Relief should be immediate, and range of motion improved.

Chronic pain

Sha related to Deficiency will appear pale and replete and will appear less than in an Excess condition. The sha may appear throughout the area, but not be abundant. It can be dark or light, but is thin looking. The pain associated with deficiency is dull, achey, and lingering. Pain will resolve with Gua sha but may return. With repeated applications, the sha should lighten as the issue resolves itself.

Moving off of one stroke line before completing is referred to as 'going shopping'

(Nielson 2013)

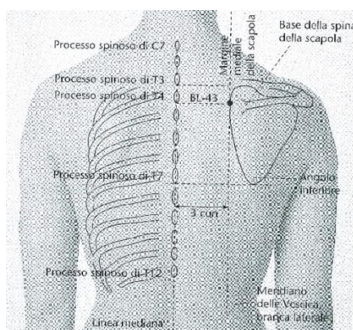
Body Areas to Treat

The rule of thumb for Gua sha is that the area to be treated should be accessible but relaxed. Always try to make the patient comfortable, and in a position that makes the treatment easy for the practitioner.

Upper Back, Neck, Shoulders and Head

Sitting on a stool, with the head resting on the treatment table is a good position to have the neck and shoulders in a relaxed position. If a massage chair is available, this is also a good option.

Treat the spine. Flatten the instrument and stroke lightly. Complete this line before moving right or left, and treat one side completely before switching to the other side. Strokes should be 4-6 inches in length



For shoulder, upper back or trapezius problems be sure to gua sha medial to the scapula. BL 43 is known as the shoulder Yu point, and should not be missed.

Work along the top of the scapula, toward the shoulder, allowing the strokes to follow the curves of the body.

Stay on the same area until it is complete, or if you return to the area it will sting the client.

If shoulder pain exists in only a certain position, then place the body in the same position to perform Gua sha.

Remember that the neck can be a more painful area, and that sha marks may be visible. Make sure to get consent from client before performing gua sha on the neck.

Common Conditions to Treat Upper Back, Neck, Shoulders

Influenza: Wind-Cold, Damp

Acute head cold, sinusitis, rhinitis, bronchitis

headache, toothache, trigeminal neuralgia, Bell's Palsy

Eye problems, ear problems, TMJ

Upper back pain and extremity problems (add extremities)

Shoulder dysfunction, tennis elbow, carpal tunnel syndrome, frostbite (add extremity)

Common Conditions to Treat Upper Back, Neck, Shoulders and Chest

Asthma, emphysema, cough, deficient Yin, neck pain, thyroid,

Middle Body

To treat the mid-back, it is usually easiest to position the patient in prone position.

Palpate tender points, and Gua sha using the principles of midline out, and distal toward the area. When working on the ribs, follow the angled contour of the ribs.

Common Conditions to Treat Middle Body

Epigastric pain, abdominal pain, flank pain, hepatitis, jaundice, stomach ulcer, nausea, bloating, gas, distention

Rib pain, intercostal neuralgia, rib fractures, dislocation, back pain

Herpes zoster (shingles) - after lesions have healed

Lower Back and Hips

The lower back and hips can be treated in many positions, making sure that the muscles are as relaxed as possible. The muscles of the lower back and hips can be well exposed by putting the client in a leaning or forward kneeling position as in child's pose in yoga. Many conditions of the lower back can be effectively treated with Gua sha. Side lying position is a good position to address hip issues, and to treat the IT bands, glutes, and sciatica.

Common Conditions to Treat Lower Back and Hips

Acute and chronic low back pain, lumbar disc herniation, kidney problems, urinary bladder issues, pelvic floor pain, genital pain, impotence, vaginitis, excessive or deficient vaginal lubrication, colon, rectal prolapse, hemorrhoids, uterus, ovaries, irregular menses, uterine fibroids, inducing or treating labour

Common Conditions to Treat Lower Back and Hips and Extremities

Sciatica, hip pain, hamstring, quadriceps strain, knee injury, ankle strain, foot/toe injury, heel pain. Plantar fasciitis, difficulty walking

Other areas:

Chest and Sternum

To treat problems in the sternum and ventral ribs, the sternum should be stroked from the top down to the xyphoid process. Proceed very gently. You can perform Gua sha above and below breast tissue, be careful of tenderness and exposure. Gua sha can be applied to the breast for mastitis or breast distention but the technique is best done by an experienced practitioner.

The Extremities

As previously mentioned treat the torso first, usually the back. Then move on to the extremity. Have the limb relaxed in sitting, or reclining position. Always work along the muscle, and in this case the treatment can go North or South but the recommendation is always towards the heart.

Fatty Areas

Fatty areas on the Gluteal region, upper thighs and abdomen will always feel more sensitive and should be treated lightly. This is because they retain more water, and contain more cellulite. One would not expect the sha to appear as prevalently as in other areas.

References

Juhan, D., 1987 Job's Body, a Handbook for Bodywork. Station Hill Press, Barrytown, New York

Nielson, A., 2013 Gua Sha A Traditional Technique for Modern Practice 2nd Ed., Churchill Livingstone