

Review Article

Hijāmah (Cupping Therapy): Special Reference to Neuromuscular Disorders

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A B S T R A C T

The use of *Hijāmah* dates back to 3500 BC in Egypt, with records in Ebers Papyrus. But in the last two decades, *Hijāmah* is gaining its due acceptance in the management of different neuromuscular and pain disorders.

For sciatica, *Hijāmah* is advised over the sciatic nerve. *Hijāmah* with 2 cups (over the gluteal area and thigh/ over calf muscle and below the ankle), with 5 cups and even with 9 cups may be done in patients of sciatica. These different settings/ protocols of *Hijāmah* in patients with sciatica show a significant reduction in pain and disability.

Hijāmah for lower back pain is indicated on acupuncture points BL23, BL24, and BL25 by application of 2 cups on each site, either simultaneously or in a phased manner (in 3 sittings on weekly basis; cupping at one site at once, followed by next point in the next week). According to the Persian traditional method, *Hijāmah* between the scapula (on day 0), then at the sacrum (on day 3) and over the calf muscle (on day 6) gives good results in lower back pain.

Hijāmah (wet cupping) over the painful area of the neck with multiple cups (2-6) in a single sitting is the preferred method for non-specific neck pain.

Even *Hijāmah* without scarification (*Hijāmah bila Sharṭ*) has a short-term effect in all such conditions, but *Hijāmah* (wet cupping) gives spontaneous as well as long-term benefits in almost all neuromuscular and other pain disorders.

Therefore, *Hijāmah* comes as a better alternative with minimally invasive procedures for most neuromuscular disorders.

Keywords: Wet Cupping, Sciatica, Lower Back Pain, Neck Pain

Hijāmah

Hijāmah (cupping therapy) is a simple minor surgical procedure in which negative pressure is applied to the skin by sucking cups. A vacuum is created by various methods and blood is removed by scarification.¹ It is a procedure by which blood is removed from the skin (underneath the skin).² It is also known as wet cupping or cupping therapy. The word *Hijāmah* is derived from *Hajm*, which means to suck; *Hijām* is an object through which something is sucked; the term *Mihjam* is used for the tool/ object (lancet/ blade) used for scarification in the procedure of *Hijāmah*.³

Plan of Hijāmah

Prophylactic Hijāmah

Hijāmah (wet cupping) at regular intervals gives protection from many diseases mainly which develop due to excess morbid humour.^{4,5} For the prophylactic purpose, *Hijāmah* (wet cupping) is recommended to be carried out on the 17th or 19th or 21st days of lunar months; these days are also called “sunnah dates”, as these days were suggested by Prophet Mohammad (PBUH).⁶ *Ibn-e-Sina* recommended that *Hijāmah* should be preferred in the middle of the month, neither in the beginning nor at the end of the lunar month.⁷ Scholars of Hadeeth and Unani physicians accept that performing *Hijāmah* on sunnah dates will have no harmful effect on the human body, and the procedure will be beneficial.^{8,10}

Therapeutic Hijāmah

Hijāmah is recommended as a therapeutic procedure for many diseases. For therapeutic purposes, it can be performed at any time, on any date and day of the month, but the best time to perform it is from early morning till early evening. If the indication of *Hijāmah* is an emergency, it can be performed at any time and on any date.^{10,11}

Therapeutic Application

Hijāmah or cupping therapy has been done for many therapeutic purposes around the world for thousands of years, which dates back to the age of ancient Egyptian civilisation. This age-old therapy has been applied historically to treat many acute and chronic diseases, counting numerous painful conditions, disabilities, neuromuscular disorders like arthritis, sciatica, gout, fibromyalgia, skin-related ailments, gynaecological disorders etc., and even many other diseases.^{12,15}

In the last two decades, *Hijāmah* (cupping therapy) is gaining its due acceptance mainly in the management of neuromuscular painful disorders and chronic diseases. Even dry cupping (*Hijāmah bila Sharṭ*) gives appreciable results in alleviating the pain of chronic osteoarthritis and improving the mobility of stiff joints.^{16,18} It also gives good results in non-specific lower back pain, non-specific neck

pain, and other mild to moderate painful conditions,^{19,26} but the best results are seen in *Hijāmah bis Sharṭ* (wet cupping), where scarification is done at specific sites and blood is drawn. *Hijāmah* has gained much recognition in the management of moderate to severe painful conditions, like sciatica, pain due to PIVD (Prolapsed Inter Vertebral Disc), nerve compression, non-specific lower back pain, neck pain etc.^{27,33}

Application of Hijāmah in Sciatica

For the management of sciatica, Unani scholars suggest *Hijāmah* (wet cupping therapy) as one of the best treatment modalities. Following are the four main sites that are advised by a few stalwarts of Unani medicine:

1. Over hip at gluteal depression/ area over the hip joint (*warik*)^{34,38}
2. Lateral aspect or anterior aspect of the thigh (*fahiz*)^{39,40}
3. Over calf muscle (*saaq*)⁴¹
4. Below ankle joint (*kaab*)^{37,42}

Baghdadi refers that *Hijāmah* (wet cupping) should be done on both hips in order to relieve the pain of sciatica.^{35,36} Jurjani recommends *Hijāmah* in the gluteal area (*warik*) and over the calf muscle (*saaq*) for the treatment of sciatica with the emphasis that ‘it should be done repeatedly and a considerable amount of blood should be evacuated’.⁴³

Many studies have been conducted on patients with sciatica to evaluate the efficacy of *Hijāmah*, with different settings/ protocols, using different numbers of cups or placing cups at different sites. The selection of sites, application of numbers of cups, and frequency of *Hijāmah* depend on the site and severity of the pain due to sciatica.

Patients of sciatica receiving *Hijāmah* at two sites on the leg, viz. over the calf muscle (*saaq*) and below the ankle joint (*kaab*) on the leg of the affected side, at weekly intervals for 4 weeks show a comparable and statistically significant effect in reducing pain and disability.⁴⁴

Patients suffering from moderate to severe pain due to sciatica show much appreciable improvement in pain and disability after cupping therapy when *Hijāmah* is done at either two upper sites or lower sites in three regular sittings 2 weeks apart. The two upper sites include cupping over gluteal depression (*warik*) and mid of the thigh (*fahiz*) on the lateral aspect of the affected side; the two lower sites include cupping over calf muscle and below the lateral malleolus of the affected side.⁴⁵

Patients of sciatica may also be treated in a different setting of *Hijāmah* (cupping therapy). In this setting, 5 cups are applied, two cups over the hip (one on each gluteal depression), two cups over the thigh of the affected side (one over the upper thigh, another on the lower thigh) and one cup over the prominence of the calf muscle of the

affected leg. 4 sittings of *Hijamah* at an interval of 14 days with this setting, where 5 cups are applied for *Hijamah* give a statistically significant result in reducing pain and disability. The specificity of this setting is that *Hijamah* is done at four sites throughout the sciatic nerve with one site opposite to the affected leg (gluteal depression of the opposite side).⁴⁶

Another setting of *Hijamah* to treat patients with sciatica is by using 9 cups. Four cups are placed over the sciatic nerve viz. on the hip joint, back of the thigh, back of the knee, and over the calf muscle of the affected side. Additional cups are placed at the root of the sciatic nerve, one cup is placed at L5/S1, two cups bilaterally at L4/L5 vertebra, one cup at T2, and one cup at C7. This setting/ protocol also gives tremendous results.⁴⁷

In patients with sciatica, *Hijamah* (wet cupping therapy) gives visible effects, whether done by using only two cups or using 5 cups, or even 9 cups. Various clinical studies were conducted with different settings/ protocols, either by changing the site of the application or by changing the number of cups. In all such studies, the sites of cupping were at different points, but mostly over the sciatic nerve.

In the management of sciatica, cupping is also done at a few sites away from the sciatic nerve like over the nape of the neck and between the scapula in addition to cupping over the sciatic nerve.⁴⁷

All the studies on cupping therapy in patients of sciatica, irrespective of the setting/ protocol of *Hijamah* being adopted, show significant results in reducing pain and disability.

Application of *Hijamah* in Lower Back Pain

Non-specific lower back pain is another kind of chronic pain that needs long-term treatment. NSAIDs or other traditional medicines when used for a long term may produce adverse/ side effects. Cupping therapy, therefore, is becoming a better alternative to drug therapy, as it develops a prolonged analgesic effect and even improves the condition to a level where patients may continue their routine activities without any difficulty.

Many studies of *Hijamah* have been conducted on patients with lower back pain at the sites BL23, BL24 and BL25 (the sites of acupuncture for lower back pain). Cupping therapy at two such sites, in 6 sittings at an interval of 2 weeks reduces pain and disability. Better results are seen when cupping therapy is done along with other general measures and with the use of acetaminophen, as compared to patients who do not receive wet cupping.⁴⁸

Wet cupping therapy on the sites of acupuncture without any physical therapy, or any other alternative therapy, even without any kind of stretching or strengthening exercise

also gives good results to overcome the pain and disability in patients with non-specific lower back pain. *Hijamah* (wet cupping) on the acupuncture sites is also done in a phased manner with multiple sessions. Three sessions of *Hijamah* are done at an interval of one week. In a session, out of six, two treatment points are selected from the bilateral bladder meridian (BL): BL23, BL24, and BL25. Therefore, on the first day, two cups are placed bilaterally at BL23 for *Hijamah*, and in the second week, two cups are placed at BL24, and finally, in the third week, two cups are placed bilaterally at BL25. This method of wet cupping not only improves pain and associated disability with non-specific lower back pain during the treatment period, but also at least for the next 2 weeks.⁴⁹

There is another phased method of *Hijamah* (cupping therapy) for lower back pain, which is known as the Persian traditional method of *Hijamah*. In this method, *Hijamah* is done in a series of three phases at an interval of 3 days (i.e., 0, 3rd, and 6th days). In phase 1 (day 0), *Hijamah* is done between the two scapulas, opposite to T1-T3 scapular spine. In phase 2 (day 3), it is done at the sacrum area, between the coccyx bone and lumbar vertebrae, and in phase 3 (day 6), it is done over the gastrocnemius muscle (prominence of the calf muscle). During phase 3, the calf area is treated depending on whether the back pain is experienced on one side or both.³⁰

Hijamah (wet cupping therapy) in a single sitting using multiple cups (2-6 cups) is also done in the management of non-specific lower back pain. The number of cups depends on the area and the severity of pain. This method is associated with greater short-term clinical benefit in pain and disability of non-specific lower back pain than usual care.⁵⁰

A single session of dry cupping by placing cups bilaterally at the acupuncture points BL23, BL24, and BL25 also give positive results, showing a significant improvement in all pain severity items and sleep in the Brief Pain Inventory and a decrease in disability in Roland-Morris disability questionnaire.⁵¹

Studies affirm that even cupping without scarification (dry cupping therapy) when done over the same sites gives good and appreciable results in temporarily reducing pain and improving disability for a long time.

Application of *Hijamah* in Neck Pain

The cases of neck pain are increasing day by day, due to many reasons including incorrect posture. Due to long-term medical treatment with anti-inflammatory analgesics, patients prefer non-medicinal treatment modalities and procedures. *Hijamah* (wet cupping) is becoming the procedure of choice in all painful neuromuscular disorders including neck pain.

Hijāmah (wet cupping) over the painful area of the neck with multiple cups (2-6) in a single sitting is the preferred method for non-specific neck pain. The number of cups depends upon the area and the severity of pain. Just a single sitting of traditional cupping therapy is effective in reducing pain along with improvement in quality of life in chronic neck pain.⁵²

In a systematic review and meta-analysis of randomised control trials of cupping therapy in the management of neck pain, eighteen RCTs were selected and compared with the no-intervention group. In this review, cupping proved to be effective in the reduction of neck pain in patients.⁵³

The patients with non-specific neck pain also respond to dry cupping therapy (*Hijāmah bila Sharṭ*), where six to eight cups are placed on the neck region for about 10 minutes. Dry cupping on alternate days for at least 2 weeks relieves non-specific neck pain and improves the quality of life. This method of cupping also produces long-term effects, relieving pain for more than 2 weeks after completion of therapy.⁵⁴

Discussion

Chronic and non-specific pain is a matter of concern as the cases are increasing at a considerable pace due to lifestyle changes in the present era. The pain due to different neuromuscular disorders like sciatica, lower back pain, neck pain, fibromyalgia etc. requires long-term treatment to cope-up with routine life activities. The medical treatment is the use of NSAIDs and other analgesics, however, they provide short-term relief and their long-term use has many adverse effects.

Hijāmah (cupping therapy) has been practised since ancient times and nowadays, it is widely used all over the world for the management of various diseases in general and musculoskeletal disorders in particular. The method of *Hijāmah* where dry cupping is done first followed by scarification and suction with a vacuum cup is more beneficial than that where scarification is done directly. This method has many advantages as seen in many theories and studies. When dry cupping is done before scarification, the morbid matter/ inflammatory substance gets collected underneath the cupping site; removal of blood with scarification help in the removal of morbid matter/ inflammatory substance from the site of *Hijāmah*. It also activates the immune system; improves blood circulation and produces endogenous opioids (endorphins). The combined effect of all these changes produces desired effects, thereby reducing pain and disability in different kinds of neuromuscular disorders like sciatica, lower back pain, ad neck pain etc.¹

Different methods/ settings/ protocols of *Hijāmah* are being adopted to manage pain and disability in different neuromuscular disorders. Dry cupping (*Hijāmah bila Sharṭ*) is also being practised for the same reason, but it gives short-term benefits and needs multiple and frequent sittings.⁵⁵

Conclusion

It is proposed that *Hijāmah* (cupping therapy) is a comparatively safer and more effective treatment modality as compared to long-term medications for the treatment of various common neuromuscular and pain disorders like chronic neck pain, lower back pain, and sciatica.

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