



# HEALING FROM THE INSIDE OUT: A REVIEW OF CUPPING THERAPY AND ITS THERAPEUTIC EFFECTS

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## ABSTRACT

In Unani medicine, *Hijama*, derived from the Arabic term *Al-Hajm*, meaning “to restore to its original size” or “to suck.” it is categorized into Wet Cupping (*Hijama Bish Shart*) and Dry Cupping (*Hijama Bila Shart*) each with unique principles and applications. Wet cupping, often employed for treatment, involves minor skin incisions to evacuate harmful humors, while dry cupping redirects toxins without incision, offering preventive and palliative benefits. Mechanistically, *Hijama* operates through *Tanqiya-e-Mawad* (evacuation of morbid matter) and *Imala-e-Mawad* (diversion of toxins), promoting the body’s innate healing power (*Tabiyat Mudabbira-e-Badan*). *Hijama* has been reported to have various effects, including pain relief, improved blood flow, and immune system modulation. From a modern medical standpoint, various theories support *Hijama*’s therapeutic actions. These include the Pain Gate Control Theory, Diffuse Noxious Inhibitory Controls (DNICs), Reflex Zone Activation, Nitric Oxide Release, Blood Detoxification, and Immune Modulation. Notably, *Hijama* enhances local blood circulation, reduces inflammation, promotes lymphatic drainage, stimulates endogenous opioids (endorphins and enkephalins), and may even influence gene expression. Emerging evidence also points to its role in reducing cholesterol, regulating neurotransmitters, and improving hemodynamic parameters, making it a promising integrative treatment for chronic pain, inflammation, and systemic imbalance. Thus, *Hijama* represents a unique blend of traditional wisdom and contemporary science, offering a holistic, multi-dimensional approach to health and wellness. Its resurgence in global complementary medicine reflects a growing interest in safe, natural, and evidence-based therapies rooted in centuries of empirical practice.

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## INTRODUCTION

*Hijama* originates from the Arabic word “*Al-Hajm*,” meaning to restore to its original size or to suck. It refers to cupping therapy, where blood is drawn out by suction after placing a cup over a specific part of the body. *Hijama* is one of the oldest and most effective techniques for removing toxins from the body’s tissues and organs. It is a safe, affordable, and non-

invasive procedure, commonly used to alleviate pain and discomfort. The process helps draw pressure and inflammation from internal organs to the skin, pulling out toxins and harmful impurities before they are expelled from the body.<sup>1</sup> Cupping is a simple technique that uses quick, strong, and rhythmic movements to stimulate muscles. It is highly effective in relieving aches and pains associated with various conditions. As a result, cupping has the potential to improve overall quality of life.<sup>2</sup>

## DEFINITION

According to Taber’s dictionary, cupping refers to the process of applying a glass vessel to the skin, from which air is removed either by heat or with a specialized suction device.<sup>3,4</sup> Various

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scholars of *Unani medicine* have provided their own definitions of *Hijama*. For instance, *Razi* describes *Hijama* as a process in which blood flows out from the superficial small vessels in the muscles through minor incisions.<sup>5</sup> *Ibn Sina* has described the process of making incision (*Pachhna*) is known as *Hijama* which is more useful to excrete the noxious matter, accumulated close to the skin.<sup>6</sup> *Jurjani* clarifies that *Hijama* is a process by which superficial bleeding is initiated from the smaller vessels or their branches, situated within the muscles to lower down the *Imtila* without producing weakness in the power of the vital organs.<sup>7</sup> *Ibn-e Hubal Baghdadi* has defined *Hijama* as a process which helps in *istifragh-e-dam* from the small vessels of the skin & muscles and reduces the *Imtila* in the area where the cups are applied.<sup>8</sup> *Allama Kabeeruddin* says that *Hijama* at lower extremities, especially at ankle joints is similar to the *fasd* (venesection) because normally blood and noxious matter move in the downward.<sup>9</sup> The person who performs *Hijama* is called “*Hajam*,” the client of *Hijamat* is “*mohajam*,” and the instrument used for cupping is called “*mahjama*.” Latin synonym of cupping is *curcurbita*, which means like gourd.<sup>10</sup>

### Classification of *Hijama* in *unani medicine*

On the basis of scarification *Hijama* has been classified into two main types

#### **HIJAMA BISH SHART (WET CUPPING)**

*Hijama Bish shart* is an ancient technique for cleansing the body from waste substances. Cupping is a procedure performed on various parts of the body with the help of regional vacuum tools. In this process, the process of taking blood safely by creating superficial skin incisions.<sup>11</sup> The involved organ is cleansed and morbid substances are evacuated out of the respective organ. Despite phlebotomy and *fasd*.<sup>10</sup> It is further classified as<sup>12</sup>

- **HIJĀMA IDTIRARIYAH (MANDATORY):** This is performed to treat the ailments
- **HIJĀMA IKHTIYARIYAH (optional):** this is performed as a preventive measure.

There are ten criteria for *Hijama Ikhtiyāri (Voluntary Cupping)*:<sup>13</sup>

1. *Hijama* should be performed during the middle days of the lunar month as the humors are more effusive and active during this time.
2. *Hijama* should be done in the afternoon session as this is the most balanced among various times of the day
3. It should be done in summer season because the elimination and evacuation of matter is easy. In summer, the matter becomes thin or less viscous due to higher temperature and this matter has predilection towards the external surface of the body.
4. Only individuals whose blood is thin or less viscous should undergo cupping.
5. Elixirs, syrups having the property of evacuation of matter from the body should be given to the person before undergoing *Hijama*.
6. *Hijama* should not be done on a person whose body has become fluffy or loose due to dissolution (*Tehlil*)

7. The age of the person undergoing *Hijama* should be between 2 and 60 years. *Hijama* is contraindicated below 2 years and above 60 years
8. *Hijamas* should not be done after *Hammām* except in those people having thick or viscous blood. This is because after *Hammām* the skin becomes thicker (*dabeez*), and in that case, deeper incisions are needed to be given to evacuate the blood which results in more pain and weakness
9. *Hijama* should not be performed after sexual intercourse
10. *Hijama* should not be done after a strenuous work or exercise, because strenuous work resolves the matter excessively and weakness may occur. But in person having viscous blood, *Hijama* can be done after strenuous work or exercise.

#### **1. HIJĀMA BILA SHART (DRY CUPPING)**

Dry cupping is a commonly used technique in complementary and alternative medicine. This method entails placing suction cups on the skin to create localized negative pressure, which helps improve blood flow. By stimulating the skin through suction, dry cupping can boost both blood and lymph circulation, effectively reducing muscle pain. It has instantaneous impacts on variables like reduced muscle stiffness and enhanced blood flow, which may be associated with improved performance.<sup>14</sup> Dry cupping is further classified into two groups:<sup>12,15</sup>

A. **HIJĀMA NARIYAH (Cupping with fire)** In this type, vacuum within the cups is created by fire.

B. **HIJĀMA GAIR NARIYAH (Cupping without fire)** In this type, vacuum within the cups is created by suction pump.<sup>16,12,17</sup>

2. **HIJAMA MAI:** A type of cupping in which the decoctions of some drugs are used.<sup>18</sup>

#### **PRINCIPLES OF HIJAMA:**<sup>19,20</sup>

The principles of *Hijama* recommended by various Unani physicians include:

1. It should be conducted during the middle days of the lunar calendar month.
2. It is best performed in the afternoon as this time is most favorable for *Hijama*.
3. It should be performed in the summer. Because in this season, the materials (humors) become less viscid due to increased *Harārat* and get easily evacuated through *Hijama*.
4. It should be performed in those persons whose blood is relatively less viscid.
5. It should be performed after the use of syrups having *muqawwi-i-meda* and *dafae mawad* properties.
6. It should not be performed in weak and cachexic persons.
7. It should not be performed below 2 years and after 60 years of age.
8. It should not be performed just after *Hammām*.
9. It should not be performed just after coitus.
10. It should not be performed after heavy physical work.
11. *Hijama* is recommended to be done on days 17, 19, and 21 of the lunar calendar months; these sessions were

performed accordingly.

12. *Hijāma* should be done after one and half an hour of summer season, while after three hours of sunrise during winters.

### MECHANISM OF HIJAMA (UNANI PERSPECTIVE)

As per Unani system mechanism of action is mainly based on two ways. *Tanqiya-e-Mavad* (Evacuation of morbid matter), *Imala-e-Mavad* (Diversion of morbid matter).<sup>7,21</sup>

#### TANQIYA-E-MAWAD (Evacuation of Morbid matter)

In Unani literature, for any pathology there is root of cause or morbid matter which accumulates in particular site or organ. According to the *Tanqiya-e-Mavad* principle, morbid matter is evacuated directly from the damaged site by using the *Hijama-bish-Shart* method. It assists in identifying and getting rid of the unbalanced elements, such as heat, cold, wetness, and dryness. *Hijama-bish-Shart* facilitates the expulsion of *Akhlate-Fasida* from the body by opening the skin's pores. It also provides better circulation to the area. Affected site get nourished with fresh new blood. It enhances the body's ability to eliminate waste and expel it. An essential component of hygiene in Unani medicine is the timely and appropriate removal of waste products from the body. The main objective of treatment is to remove the cause of disharmony from the body, restore the circulation and balancing in homeostasis.

#### IMALA-E-MAVAD (Diversion of morbid matter)

*Hijama-bila-Shart* (Dry Cupping) works on the principle of *Imala-e-Mavad*. In this method, there is diversion of morbid matter from one site to other. *Hijama-bila-Shart* provides a diversion that enables the *Tabiyat mudabera badan* to take action and resolve it. Because accumulation of any morbid matter produces congestion, stagnation and blockage which results in pain. *Hijama-bila-Shart*, or dry cupping, relieves uncomfortable muscle tension and breaks up congestion and blockages while reestablishing the free flow of blood circulation. It also helps to reducing inflammation and pressure away from the deep organs (especially the heart, brain, lungs, liver and kidneys) towards the skin or to outer surface of the body. This promotes the immune system's power and speeds up the healing process, allowing the body to optimum function. In other words, it assists the actions of *Physis*. In doing so, it diverts toxins and other harmful impurities from these vital organs towards the less-vital skin, before expulsion. The blood which is diverted allows a fresh stream of blood to that area.<sup>22</sup> *Jalinus* has mentioned that when the humours become thick in affected joint, *Hijāma* becomes very useful. It opens the pores of the skin, enhances the blood circulation, nourish the affected area with fresh blood and improves the eliminative function which allows the *Aklāt-i-fāsida* to be evacuated from the body. It helps to draw out and eliminate the imbalanced qualities i.e. *Hār* (heat), *Bārid* (cold), *Ratab* (moistness), *Yabis* (dryness).<sup>1</sup>

### MECHANISM OF ACTION OF HIJAMA IN MODERN MEDICINE

The mechanism of action of cupping therapy has remained unclear until now. The primary proposed mechanism involves the effects of sub-atmospheric pressure suction, which enhances peripheral blood circulation and boosts immunity. Numerous

theories have been proposed to elucidate the various effects of cupping therapy and its underlying mechanisms.<sup>23</sup>

#### Pain gate theory

This hypothesis offers a thorough explanation of how pain travels from its source to the brain and how it develops there, ultimately sending a protective efferent signal back to the stimulated or injured area. It suggests that localized damage to the epidermis and capillary vessels acts as a nociceptive stimulus.

#### Diffuse noxious inhibitory controls (DNICs)

Another theory associated with pain reduction as a mechanism of cupping therapy is Diffuse Noxious Inhibitory Controls (DNIC). DNIC refers to the inhibition of activity in convergent or broadly responsive nociceptive spinal neurons triggered by a separate, spatially distant noxious stimulus.

#### Reflex zone theory

In cupping therapy, when a contaminated organ sends a signal to the skin via the autonomic nerves, the skin responds by becoming sensitive and painful, often accompanied by swelling. The application of cups to the skin activates skin receptors. This entire process leads to increased blood circulation and enhanced blood supply to both the skin and internal organs through neural connections.

#### Release of nitric oxide theory

Nitric Oxide (NO) is a signaling gas molecule that mediates vasodilation and regulates blood flow and volume. It plays a role in controlling blood pressure, enhancing immune responses, managing neurotransmission, and is involved in cell differentiation, among other physiological functions. Cupping therapy may trigger the release of NO from endothelial cells, thereby promoting various beneficial biological changes.

#### Activation of immune system theory

From the point of view of body immunity and defense, practitioners begin to realize the action of cupping therapy through modifying immunoglobulin and hemoglobin, and its diverse immunological effects. Cupping decreases serum IgE and IL-2 levels and increases serum C3 levels which are found to be unusual in the immune system.

#### Blood detoxification theory

This theory focuses on the removal of toxic substances from the area where the cups are applied. According to the blood detoxification theory, there is a reduction in levels of uric acid, HDL, LDL, and changes in the molecular structure and function of hemoglobin (Hb), along with other hematological changes. This theory explains how cupping therapy facilitates the body's elimination of toxins and harmful substances through its underlying mechanisms.

#### Genetic modulation theory

In wet cupping therapy, skin incisions are made, resulting in superficial wounds. The combination of mechanical pressure, pain, and anaerobic metabolism, along with these superficial cuts, can generate physiological and mechanotransduction signals. These signals may either activate or inhibit gene expression. As a result, signaling cascades activate transcription



factors, which in turn trigger or suppress the transcription of specific target genes. This mechanism of action may contribute to both the local and systemic therapeutic effects of cupping therapy.<sup>4</sup>

### Prostaglandin Theory

Prostaglandins are generated in the body due to inflammation and are responsible for transmitting pain signals to the brain. By performing *Hijama bish Shart*, these substances are eliminated from the body, leading to a reduction in pain.

### Endorphins and Enkephalin Production Theory

These are naturally occurring endogenous opioid components released (Endorphins from Pituitary gland and Enkephalin from Brain) in our body and are called as 'endogenous pleasure substances' which result in pain reduction and improve mood.<sup>4</sup>

### Taibah theory

This theory provides the most precise scientific explanation of *Hijama* and its therapeutic properties.<sup>18</sup> According to the Taibah theory, *Hijama Bish Shart* is considered a minor surgical excretory procedure. Its effects resemble the excretory function of the kidneys through glomerular filtration, as well as abscess drainage, allowing for the removal of pathological (disease-causing) substances from the body.<sup>24,1</sup>

### Reported Effects of Wet cupping

The exact physiological mechanisms by which wet cupping may work are yet unknown. Various factors, including (I) neural, (II) hematological, and (III) immune system functioning, are thought to contribute to the effects of wet-cupping.<sup>25</sup> In particular, wet cupping may "suppress pain" by influencing three distinct neural systems: (a) the "analgesia" system in the brain and spinal cord, which encompasses the periaqueductal gray, periventricular areas, the raphe magnus nucleus, and the nucleus reticularis paragigantocellularis; (b) the brain's opiate system, which includes endorphins and enkephalins; and (c) most significantly, by inhibiting pain transmission through simultaneous tactile sensory signals.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, diffuse noxious inhibitory controls (DNICs) may partially contribute to the pain-relieving effects observed.<sup>26</sup> It is also likely that the analgesic effect is partially due to diffuse noxious inhibitory controls (DNICs).<sup>27</sup> In the neural system, the effect occurs through the regulation of neurotransmitters and hormones like serotonin, dopamine, endorphin, acetylcholine etc.<sup>28,29,10</sup> In the hematological system, the primary effects occur by these two pathways: 1. Regulation of coagulation and anticoagulation systems like a decrease in the level of a hematological element such as fibrinogen 2. Reduction in the hematocrit, followed by an increase in blood flow and oxygenation of the end organs.<sup>1</sup>

In the immune system, the main effects occur by these three pathways:

1. Irritation of the immune system by producing local simulated inflammation followed by activation of the complementary system and increased level of immune products such as interferon and tumor necrotizing factors.
2. Organize lymph traffic and boost lymph flow through lymph vessels.

### 3. Effect on thymus.<sup>25</sup>

Cupping can promote comfort and relaxation on a systemic level and the resulting increase in endogenous opioid production in the brain leads to improved pain control. Cupping is known to significantly decrease total cholesterol, Low-Density Lipoprotein (LDL), High-Density Lipoprotein (HDL) Ratio. Using cupping therapy, one of the antiviral mechanisms that lowers pain scores is the large decrease in lymphocytes in the local blood associated to the affected area with an increase in neutrophils. Blood loss and vasodilation have the beneficial impact of increasing parasympathetic activity and relaxes the body's muscles, which may also be linked to the after-effects of cupping for the patient. Moreover, it is believed that blood loss enhances the quality of the blood that is still there, thus alleviating pain symptoms. It has also been found that increases red blood cells (RBCs). It has been claimed that cupping therapy helps to drain excess fluids and toxins, loosen adhesions and regenerate connective tissue, increase blood flow to the skin and muscles, stimulate the peripheral nervous system, reduce pain, control high blood pressure, and modulates the immune system.<sup>23</sup>

## DISCUSSION

*Hijama*, or cupping therapy, is deeply rooted in the Unani system of medicine and carries both therapeutic and preventive value. Its practice, dating back centuries, is well-documented by classical scholars such as *Ibn Sina*, *Razi*, *Jurjani*, and *Ibn Hubal Baghdadi*, each of whom emphasized its role in maintaining humoral balance and expelling morbid substances from the body. The therapy is aligned with the Unani principles of *Tanqiya-e-Mawad* (evacuation) and *Imala-e-Mawad* (diversion), which aim to remove waste materials and restore the body's internal harmony.

Modern science supports many of the traditional claims through emerging physiological and biochemical evidence. Various proposed mechanisms—such as the pain gate control theory, diffuse noxious inhibitory controls (DNICs), release of endorphins, vasodilation via nitric oxide, and activation of immune responses demonstrate how *Hijama* exerts both local and systemic therapeutic effects. Additionally, *Hijama* promotes detoxification, improves lymphatic drainage, and helps regulate neurotransmitters and hormones that modulate pain and inflammation. It also helps in re-establishing tissue oxygenation and enhancing microcirculation.

The integration of *Hijama* into modern complementary and alternative medicine reflects a growing acceptance of its benefits. However, its clinical efficacy depends on proper technique, timing (as per lunar cycles in traditional guidelines), patient constitution, and condition-specific indications. The distinctions between wet cupping and dry cupping, including variations like fire and non-fire cupping, indicate the adaptability of the practice across a wide range of clinical conditions. Furthermore, safety precautions such as age limitations and post-activity restrictions are well-outlined in classical texts, underscoring the depth of traditional knowledge.

Despite its popularity, *Hijama* is still under-researched in terms of large-scale, controlled clinical trials. There is a need for standardized protocols, scientific validation, and integration with evidence-based guidelines to promote its broader

acceptance in global health systems.

## CONCLUSION

*Hijama* represents a time-tested therapeutic modality that integrates well with both traditional Unani principles and modern biomedical science. It serves as an effective tool for detoxification, immune modulation, pain relief, and overall physiological balance. The therapy's mechanisms, as interpreted through modern research, align closely with ancient Unani doctrines, thereby offering a unique model for integrative medicine. While anecdotal and clinical experiences highlight its vast benefits, more rigorous scientific studies and standardization are necessary to validate its safety, efficacy, and scope in modern healthcare. With continued interdisciplinary research and clinical application, *Hijama* holds the potential to emerge as a mainstream complementary therapy across diverse medical systems.

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