Folk Medicine – Cupping Therapy (Funduzi)

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.58894/AR-HBg.2025.9.16-25

Abstract: ***Folk medicine*** *is a complex cultural and historical phenomenon that brings together centuries-old traditions, empirical knowledge, and philosophical beliefs of various peoples. It can be defined as part of Bulgarians' everyday experience in maintaining and restoring health. One of the most emblematic and oldest methods in our folk medicine, preserved to this day, is* ***Cupping Therapy (CT). Cupping therapy****, or "funduzi" (as it is known in some dialects), as it is called in our lands, has been a leading remedy for treating a number of diseases. However, the mechanism of its action is not fully understood (Ghods, Sayfouri and Ayati, 2016 ; Al-Bedah, 2019).This review aims to analyze the historical development of Cupping Therapy and to identify possible mechanisms of its action from the perspective of modern medicine, as well as to propose possible explanations for its effects.*

Keywords*: historical heritage; Cupping Therapy; physiological mechanisms*

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FOLK MEDICINE AS A CULTURAL AND HISTORICAL PHENOMENON[1]

Folk medicine is an important part of folk culture, in which religious beliefs, rational knowledge, cultural rituals, superstitions, healing practices, and deep rational knowledge are intertwined. It represents folk wisdom that has stood the test of time in the field of so-called alternative, unconventional medicine. In the recent years, there has been a growing interest in folk healing practices. The interest in it is understandable, and the focus on the traditions of folk medicine is most timely, presenting it precisely as a rich, thousands-of-years-old system of knowledge and accumulated experience. We have witnessed its development over the centuries, as it has shed "the magic and enrichment itself" with the methods and tools of scientific medicine. The interaction between folk and scientific medicine is undeniable. Historical facts show that scientific medicine is the offspring of folk medicine, and that it has systematically adopted the best achievements (Todorova, 2019).

[1] ChatGPT is used for English grammar revision and translation.

The purpose of this study is to examine the traditions and innovations in the application of cupping therapy, their development over time, and their mechanism of action, their functional characteristics and their ability to protect and preserve people's health today.

HISTORICAL AND CULTURAL CONTEXT

The development of knowledge about CT has a long history. It is an ancient healing practice known in nearly all major civilizations. For centuries, this method of treatment has been practiced, becoming a unique imprint of its time that has carried over to the present day.

- **Ancient Egypt and Greece**: Cupping therapy was first mentioned and described in the 'Ebers Papyrus' (1550 B.C.), the oldest medical manuscript. In Greece, it was used by Hippocrates and was part of the methods for "extracting diseased fluids" from the body (Xun, Hon and Shih Chau, 2018).
- **Eastern tradition:** In Traditional Chinese Medicine, cupping is used to regulate the life energy "Qi" and improve blood circulation (Tao and Qu, 2009 ; Xun, Hon and Shih Chau, 2018).
- **The Islamic world:** The practice is known as **"Hijama"** (capillary bloodletting) and is closely linked to spiritual and religious traditions (Big Box Labs, 2018).
- **Bulgarian lands**: Archaeological evidence proves that cupping was used as early as the First and Second Bulgarian Empires as part of local folk healing practices (BNT, 2017).

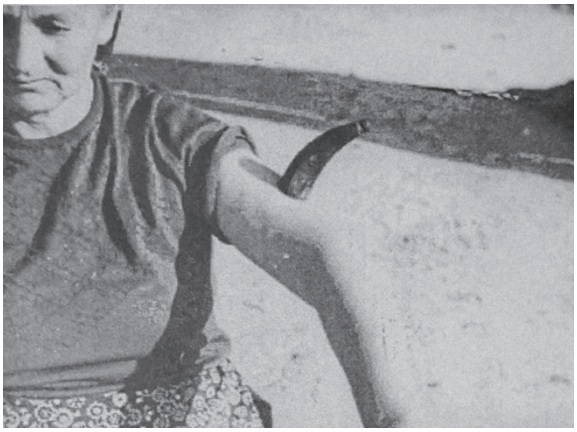
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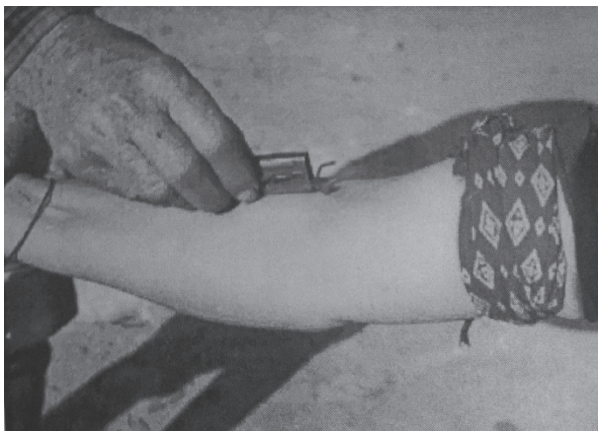
Cupping, or "funduzi" as it is known in our region, has been a primary method of treating a variety of diseases. In order to do this, a vacuum is created on the skin using specially crafted glass cups of a specific shape and size, medium-sized wine glasses with thick, even rims, animal horns, glass bottles, and the application of hard clay pots (based on the principle of cupping) (Stefanov, 2006). CT are used to treat the flu, the cold, and a sore throat (Tzvetkov, 2013); they are also used to treat colds and pneumonia (Marinska, 2025), stinging, cough, shortness of breath, rheumatism, bruises, boils, infertility, heartache, bloodletting, etc. They had been placed by healers and relatives of the patients on the back, chest, lower back, hips, and directly on the affected area. The number of cups depends on the size of the area affected. The CT had been placed immediately after their walls were burnt. When the cup is positioned correctly, the skin beneath it swells and turns blue. The cups had been left on children for about 10 minutes and on adults for about 20 minutes. After removing them, the area had been rubbed with olive oil or petroleum jelly, or a bath or compress was given. The principle of CT had been used to draw out pus from a boil by placing the mouth of a heated bottle on it; to place a pot on the navel in cases of heartache and an enlarged navel, as well as a horn on a bruised area (Yaneva-Balabanska et al., 2018, p. 119-120).

TOOLS AND REMEDIES OF THE PAST

Bloodletting (BL) using a CT or a horn had been also a primary therapeutic method in the past. It is an ancient healing ritual, attested to both in Old Bulgarian written sources and by travelers who had visited our lands. BL is a widely used treatment for stings, burns, high blood pressure, coughs, headaches, tuberculosis, rabies, and other illnesses. BL is based on the need to purify the blood, the impurity of which (bad blood) is the cause of the diseases mentioned, especially in a person who "eats fatty foods and drinks strong wine." People say of such individuals: "a person with a lot of blood," "the blood has gotten the better of him," "blood brings trouble," or that a person "walks through fire" or "a burden has fallen upon his body." Leeches or special instruments were used for this purpose. Most often, this had been done as follows: the arm is tightened and then pierced with a sharp knife or a special tool called a "neshterche" (scarifier) (Figs. 1 and 2). An animal horn is placed over the made incision, and the blood is drawn out using a vacuum. Bloodletting is also performed at other points on the body—

under the tongue, on the forehead, on the back, and on the shoulders (Kableshkova, 2003 ; Yaneva-Balabanska et al., 2018). After the BL, bleeding is stopped, and the patient rests for up to half an hour and takes the appropriate medications. Old folk medicine books are full of recommendations for KP for many diseases (Yaneva-Balabanska et al., 2018).





Figures. 1 and 2. Bloodletting with neshterche (scarifier) and a horn

THE ESSENCE OF THE METHOD

Cupping therapy is a type of physiotherapy in which specially designed cups are applied to specific acupoints or areas of the body in order to create localized congestion or stasis using negative pressure, either through heat or mechanical suction (Dimitrov, Staykova and Pirovski, 2020, p. 36-40 ; Xun, Hon and Shih Chau, 2018 ; Tao and Qu, 2009).

MECHANISM OF ACTION

1. Mechanical and warming stimulation – CT induce a form of mechanical and warming stimulation in the treated tissues.

2. They regulate yin-yang energy, replenish protective qi, and eliminate pathogenic factors. CT can regulate yin-yang energy through various combinations of acupoints or in combination with other therapies.

3. Cleansing the meridians and the circulation of qi and blood, especially where there is stagnation of qi and blood. They also activate the functions of the internal organs.

4. Establishing two-way regulation and treating multiple pathologies using the same point in a single therapy session (Xun, Hon and Shih Chau, 2018 ; Tao and Qu, 2009).

FUNCTIONAL CHARACTERISTICS OF CUPPING THERAPY

Functions

1. Regulating the body's balance – CT can regulate the body's balance, stimulate effective exchange between the blood and tissues, modulate the expansion and contraction of capillaries, and improve local blood circulation. They have a regulating effect on metabolism, ensure better local nourishment of cells, and regulate lymphatic circulation by enhancing phagocytosis of lymphocytes, thereby eliminating pathogenic conditions and restoring normal body functions.

2. Replenishing protective qi and eliminating pathogenic factors—CT can draw out pathogenic factors from the body—such as wind, cold, dampness, and heat—while replenishing protective qi.

3. Draining and improving the flow of energy channels/meridians - CT can effectively improve circulation and the smooth flow of qi and blood in the meridians and activate the function of the internal (Zang-Fu) organs through various CT techniques—static, dynamic, and blood-letting CT.

4. Lubrication of the joints – as CT can dispel cold and wind, disperse dampness, and improve the circulation of qi and blood, they thereby lubricate and nourish the joints and relieve joint pain.

5. Removing toxic substances from the body and draining pus – by applying stronger negative pressure, cupping can be used to treat internal conditions such as boils, carbuncles, wounds, ulcers, stagnant blood, and the accumulation of toxic substances. In cases of suppuration, cupping can draw out pus, relieve pain, and accelerate the healing process (Xun, Hon and Shih Chau, 2018 ; Tao and Qu, 2009).

A CONTEMPORARY APPROACH

Although cupping therapy is a treatment that dates back centuries and had been used by various cultures and societies, its mechanism of action is not well understood. Today, cupping therapy is being rediscovered by modern medicine as a complementary therapy in rehabilitation for various musculoskeletal disorders of the musculoskeletal system, to relieve pain symptoms, as a restorative method in sports, to improve quality of life, and to support the body's natural healing processes.

1. How do cupping therapy work? The physics of decompression

A vacuum is created by drawing the skin into the cupping cup. This causes increased blood flow, drawing blood to the surface, which improves microcirculation. The fascia is stretched, which relieves tension in the muscles, allowing them to relax. When the cupping cup is applied and a vacuum is created, the skin is drawn upward and inward into the cup. During suction, blood is "drawn" toward the surface, and blood vessels enlarge due to the action of certain vasodilators such as adenosine, noradrenaline, and histamine. As a result, blood circulation in the affected area increases. This allows for the instant elimination of toxins trapped in the tissues, thereby detoxifying the body. The capillaries expand, and in areas of the body with issues (affected areas), some of them may rupture slightly (which is why redness or purple discoloration occurs after CT). Microcirculation increases from within, blood flows upward, stagnant blood begins to circulate, lymphatic flow is activated, and nerve endings are stimulated (Al-Bedah et al., 2019, pp. 90-97).

REGISTRATION OF GENERAL AND PATHOLOGICAL REACTIONS AFTER APPLICATION OF CUPPING THERAPY. TRACE DECODER (Fig. 3).

After the suction cups are removed, the skin may turn reddish or develop purplish-reddish spots (ecchymosis). These marks are a natural reaction of the body, and these changes usually disappear over time, depending on the body's initial condition.

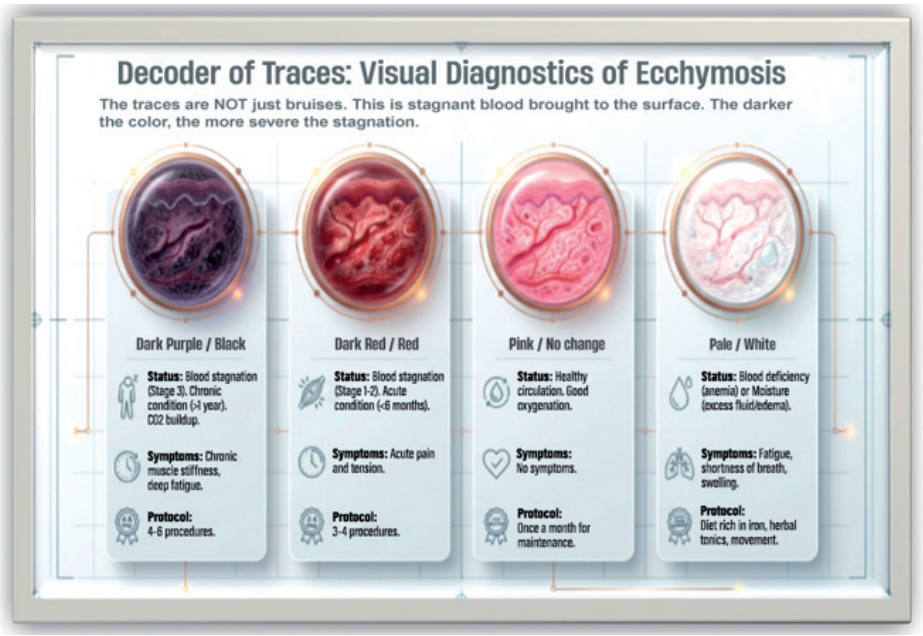


Figure 3. Trace decoder. Visual diagnosis of ecchymosis

This isn't just a bruise, but "stagnant" blood and lymph that has been drawn to the surface; the darker the discoloration, the more stagnation there was, which the body then breaks down and clears away. **After the cupping cup is removed**, the blood begins to flow back as a new, fresher supply of blood arrives, effectively "resetting" the treated area. Simply said, CT does this (**Fig. 4**):

☞ → pulls → loosens → activates → clears

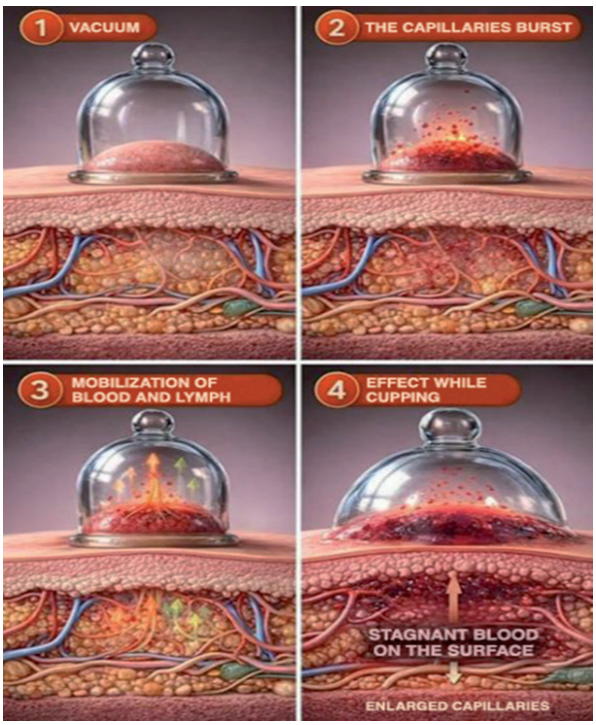


Figure 4. Mechanism of action of Cupping Therapy

How do suction cupping work? Six scientific mechanisms of action

Many theories have been proposed to explain the numerous effects of cupping therapy and its mechanisms of action. A recent review of the scientific literature identifies six main mechanisms of action at the cellular and systemic levels:

1. The Gate Control Theory of Pain. The Gate Control Theory of Pain, proposed in 1965 by Ronald Melzak and Patrick Wall, explains how the nervous system modulates pain signals. According to this model:

- **Small nerve fibers:** They transmit pain signals. When they are active, they open the "gate", allowing the signal to reach the brain.
- **Large nerve fibers**: They transmit non-painful sensory signals (touch, pressure). Their activity stimulates inhibitory (suppressing) neurons in the spinal cord, which "close the gate" and block the passage of pain impulses

This explains why instinctively rubbing an injured area relieves pain—stimulating the touch receptors sends signals along the large nerve fibers, which suppress the pain (Ahmadi, Schwebel and Rezaei, 2008 ; Moayedi and Davis, 2012). This theory forms the basis of modern pain management methods, such as:

- The use of TENS (transcutaneous electrical nerve stimulation) devices
- Application of therapeutic massage and acupuncture (Science Direct, n.d.).

2. Diffuse Noxious Inhibitory Control (DNIC). Diffuse Noxious Inhibitory Control **(DNIC)** is a natural pain-relieving mechanism of the central nervous system, known as **"pain suppresses pain."** In this process, the application of a second, distant, and strong stimulus (e.g., immersing a hand in ice water) reduces the perception of the initial pain (Morgan and Whitney, 1996 ; Le Bars, Villanueva and Willer, 1991).

Mechanism of action

- **Process**: The activation of nociceptors (pain receptors) by the second stimulus triggers descending nerve pathways (from the brainstem to the spinal cord).
- **Result:** These pathways suppress the activity of sensory neurons in the spinal cord that transmit pain signals.
- **Biochemistry:** The process is primarily mediated by the neurotransmitters, noradrenaline and serotonin (Sherman, 2016 ; Schouenborg and Dickenson, 1985).

3. The theory of reflex zones. Reflexology demonstrates the existence of a neurological connection between specific zones that, through nerve pathways, correspond to certain internal organs and systems. This connection is established by applying pressure to specific reflex points (through massage or cupping) located on various areas of the human body, thereby sending impulses to the corresponding organ via nerve pathways, which aids blood circulation and relieves

tension (Schouenborg and Dickenson, 1985 ; Marquardt, 2000), and the pulses sent have a soothing and healing effect (Lett, 2000).

4. Release of nitric oxide. Vacuum therapy stimulates the local production and release of nitric oxide (NO) in the treated tissues. The vacuum increases blood circulation and causes microtraumas that trigger the body's immune response (Moncada, Palmer and Higgs, 1991).

Mechanism of action:

• ***Vasodilation***: Released NO acts as a powerful vasodilator (it widens blood vessels). This improves the flow of oxygen and nutrients to the muscles and skin (Jin, Liu, Meng, Li and Guo, 2010 ; Tian, Qin and Zhang, 2007 ; Ernst and Lee, 1986).

• ***Angiogenesis:*** This process stimulates the formation of new capillaries, promoting long-term recovery;

• ***Pain relief:*** NO modulates nerve signals and helps clear inflammatory mediators and lactic acid from the treated areas quicker.

Health benefits:

• Boosting cellular metabolism and lymphatic drainage:

• Relief from muscle spasms, chronic back pain, and joint pain.

• Boosting overall immunity as a result of local stimulation.

5. Activation of the immune system. Cupping therapy stimulates the immune system through localized vacuum pressure, which improves blood circulation and lymphatic drainage in the treated area. This accelerates the movement of white blood cells, helps eliminate toxins, and activates the body's natural defense mechanisms against colds, muscle aches, and inflammations (Mohammad Khalil, Mahmoud Al-Qaoud and Shaqqour, 2013).

How do cupping therapy support the immune system?

• Chen and Li (2004) claim that cupping therapy is a form of autohemolysis that can produce histamine-like substances and thereby enhance tissue and organ activity, as well as immunity. A recent study by Yang Guo et al. (2017) suggests that the microenvironment changes when the skin surface is stimulated, and physical signals are transformed into biological signals that also interact with one another within the body. These signaling cascades activate the neuroendocrine-immune system, producing a therapeutic effect (Al-Bedah et al., 2019).

• ***Enhanced circulation:*** The vacuum attracts oxygen- and nutrient-rich blood to specific areas, which helps with tissue repair.

• ***Lymphatic drainage:*** Stimulates the lymphatic system, which is responsible for cleansing the body of pathogens and waste products.

• ***Stress relief:*** Reduces physical stress, which often suppresses immune function.

6. *Body detoxification.* Cupping therapy aids in the body's detoxification by stimulating blood circulation and accelerating lymphatic drainage, which facilitates the elimination of metabolic waste from the tissues and activates the body's natural cleansing processes (Daniali, VaezeMahdavi, Ghazanfari and Naseri, 2008 ; Gok, Kazanci, Erdamar and Gokgoz, 2016).

How cupping therapy helps with detoxification:

• ***Lymphatic drainage:*** Stimulates lymph flow to help eliminate toxins.

• ***Microcirculation***: Expands capillaries and increases oxygen flow.

• ***Cellular metabolism:*** Accelerates cell renewal in the treated areas.

• ***Organ facilitation:*** It assists the liver and kidneys by removing waste products locally.

It is possible that these theories interact harmoniously to produce beneficial effects from cupping therapy in the treatment of patients with various conditions and to enhance the well-being of healthy people (Al-Bedah et al., 2019).

IMPORTANT CONTRAINDICATIONS

• In cases of hemorrhage and a tendency to bleed, or persistent post-traumatic bleeding such as hemophilia, purpura, and leukemia; In cases of varicose veins and enlarged capillaries;

• In cases of severe allergic skin irritations (extremely dry or cracked skin, infectious

skin conditions such as scabies, open wounds, or ulcers), varicose (enlarged) veins, deep vein thrombosis, and large blood vessels;

- In cases of malignant skin cancer or if there are localized lesions, wounds, inflammation, eczema, or moles in the treatment area.
- Traumatic fractures;
- In patients with a high fever and convulsions;
- On the abdomen, lumbosacral area and chest of pregnant women, for whom gentle application of the oil is necessary on other parts of the body; During the menstrual cycle
- Patients with advanced stages of tuberculosis;
- In addition, suction cups should not be applied to the heart area in cases of severe cardiovascular disease, heart failure, respiratory failure, or severe edema;
- In people with severe anxiety, generalized convulsions or spasms, manic states, and an inability to communicate effectively;
- In people who have consumed large amounts of food, alcohol, or opiates, or who are malnourished or exhausted;
- On lymph knots and mammary glands, dislocated joints, severe anemia, muscular dystrophy, the placement of static suction cups in children under 2 years of age, abscesses, excessive swelling, pacemakers, the sensory organs, and the genital area.
- Botox and fillers: During a vacuum facial massage, areas where injections have been administered should be avoided, as the vacuum can accelerate their breakdown.

CONCLUSIONS

1. Cuppping Therapy, whether performed on their own or in combination with other physical modalities, demonstrate a high therapeutic effect, enrich treatment approaches, enhance the potential for more effective treatment, and are suitable for treating many conditions (Subev, Atanasova and Nedev, 2015);

2. Cupping therapy helps increasing the blood flow to inflamed areas in the muscles (Rozenfeld and Kalichman, 2016), provide the necessary nutrients to the treated area and enhance healing by shortening the recovery period and enabling athletes to return to training and competition sooner;

3. Cupping therapy can provide pain relief, help reduce symptoms associated with common musculoskeletal disorders, and improve quality of life (Al-Bedah, Khalil and Elolemy, 2011).

4. Cupping therapy can be very relaxing and can help reduce muscle restrictions, scars, and adhesions, as well as reduce swelling and increase range of motion (Komal et al., 2024, p. 109).

5. Cupping therapy is an effective alternative for combating daily and work-related stress; they improve metabolic processes, restore vitality and psycho-emotional balance, relieve fatigue, and eliminate tension in the body.

6. Venduses are a powerful factor in enhancing our functional capabilities and our level of antioxidant protection; they are also very important for accelerating healing processes, facilitating recovery, and strengthening the immune system.

DISCUSSION

A historical review confirms that cupping therapies have ancient origins; over time, as all sciences have developed, they have consistently progressed and been continuously refined. Not a single theory could explain the mechanisms of action behind cupping therapy, along with its numerous effects. It likely triggers multiple effects through multiple mechanisms (Tagil et al., 2014). Through the power of decompression, it removes barriers within the body (pain, toxins, spasms) and awakens its own self-healing and regenerative systems.

Detailed studies on its mechanisms of action, supported by well-developed scientific research, would help ensure the safe and effective use of cupping therapies. However, consulting a specialist is recommended before incorporating this method into treatment programs.

CONCLUSION

Today, we are rediscovering the intelligence of this ancient healing art through the

lens of modern science. Cupping therapy is neither magic nor a substitute for conventional medicine. It is a precise, scientifically proven biomechanical tool. Today, Cupping therapy treatments are becoming increasingly common and popular in SPAs and Wellness centers, massage studios, and specialized physical therapy clinics as a good alternative for treating various health issues and high levels of stress (Dimitrova, 2023).

Cupping therapy is an excellent way to improve health and regain energy. It would be suitable medical wellness tools for many modern health conditions (Dimitrova, 2019 ; Tomova, 2021 ; Nesheva, 2023). The problems facing today's society, caused by a dynamic and stressful lifestyle, are increasingly contributing to rising rates of illness and a decline in quality of life. This is driving greater interest and attention toward finding effective methods, rituals, and approaches for managing stress and discovering unconventional ways to maintain good physical and psycho-emotional health (Chipeva, 2022 ; Ignatova, 2022). The implementation of procedures focused on relaxation and ensuring physical and mental well-being using Cupping Therapy as a therapeutic method - either on its own or in combination with other physical therapies - in the Spa and Wellness industry would be an effective alternative for combating stress and tension (Angelcheva and Tomova, 2025 ; Dimitrova, 2023 ; Dimitrova, 2018 ; Tomova, 2024). There is no doubt that Cupping Therapy will continue to gain recognition and evolve in the future. Time has preserved this valuable practice, which will continue to prove itself as an effective method for preventing illness and maintaining the health of future generations.

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Народна медицина – Вендузи (фъндузи)

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Резюме: Народната медицина е сложен културно-исторически феномен, който обединява хилядолетни традиции, емпирични знания и философски вярвания на различни народи. Тя може да бъде определена като част от всекидневния опит за запазване и възстановяване на здравето. Един от най-емблематичните методи, съхранени и до днес, е вендузотерапията. Това е един от най-старите методи в народната ни медицина. Вендузи или „фъндузи" (известно в някои диалекти), както са наричани по нашите земи, са били водещо средство за лекуване на редица заболявания. За целта се създава вакуум върху кожата, като се използват стъклени, специално изработени чаши с определена форма и големина, животински рогове, стъклени шишета, калени гърнета. Вендузотерапията набира все повече популярност като алтернативен метод за лечение на различни здравословни проблеми.

Ключови думи: *историческо наследство; вендузотерапия; физиологични механизми*