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Hijama (Cupping Therapy): A Journey Through History, Tradition & Modern Medicine**Nahida Aqeel*, Zakir Khan, Ghazala Mulla, Fahmin Khan, Asif Ansari**

Z.V.M. Unani Medical College and Hospital, Pune, India

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Correspondence to:*Nahida Aqeel****Email:**nahidaq1.2@gmail.com

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Web: www.ozziepublishers.com**Abstract**

Hijama, or cupping therapy, is a time-honoured healing practice that has been deeply embedded in various medical traditions, including Unani medicine and Prophetic medicine, and continues to be explored in modern healthcare. This literature review examines the historical evolution of hijama, tracing its significance across ancient civilisations, its foundational role in Unani medicine, and its endorsement in Prophetic traditions. Additionally, the paper explores modern scientific perspectives on cupping therapy, highlighting its physiological mechanisms, such as pain relief, detoxification, improved circulation, and immune modulation. While Unani and Prophetic medicine emphasise the holistic and preventive benefits of hijama, contemporary research seeks to validate its efficacy through clinical trials and biomedical analysis. By bridging historical insights with scientific findings, this review aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of hijama's relevance across different medical paradigms and its potential integration into evidence-based healthcare practices.

KEYWORDS: hijama, cupping therapy, unani medicine, prophetic medicine, traditional healing, modern science, alternative medicine, biomedical research, historical review, etc.

INTRODUCTION

Hijama, or cupping therapy, is an ancient medical practice with historical roots in Egyptian, Chinese, Greek, and Middle Eastern traditions[1,2]. Unani medicine aligns with humoral theory, which emphasises the balance of bodily fluids for health maintenance[3]. Additionally, it holds significance in Prophetic medicine, where it is endorsed for both preventive and curative purposes[4].

Recent scientific research has revived interest in hijama, exploring its physiological effects such as pain relief, enhanced circulation, immune modulation, and detoxification[5,6]. While traditional perspectives highlight its holistic benefits, contemporary studies seek to elucidate its mechanisms and therapeutic efficacy through empirical evidence[7]. However, challenges remain regarding its standardisation, safety, and integration into modern medical frameworks[8].

This review synthesises historical perspectives and modern research on hijama, examining its role in Unani and Prophetic medicine and its potential in contemporary healthcare. By bridging traditional knowledge with scientific inquiry, this study aims to provide insights into the evolving applications of hijama in integrative medicine.

Hijama originates from the root word "Al-hajm." Manzur, in *Lisan-ul-Arab*, explains that "the fundamental meaning of Al-hajm is to suck"[9]. In Arabic, Hijama (Cupping) signifies "restoring the original size" or "reducing in volume."

Historical Highlights and Geographical Growth of Hijamah

Cupping, an ancient practice that has been gaining attention, is believed to date back as early as 1500 BC, with historical evidence of its use in Egypt, China, and the Middle East¹¹. The ancient Egyptians were the first to implement cupping therapy systematically. The *Ebers Papyrus*, regarded as one of the oldest medical texts, written around 1550 BC in Egypt, describes cupping as a method for bloodletting to "eliminate foreign matter from the body." Notably, Hippocrates and Galen were also strong proponents of cupping therapy[10-12].

The earliest record of cupping is in *Ebers Papyrus*, one of the oldest medical textbooks in the world (1550 B.C.). However, it is believed that the practice dates back to 3000 B.C. Evidence exists that in China, the practice of cupping has existed since 1000 B.C. In ancient Greece, Galen and Hippocrates (C.460-C.370 BCE) also greatly advocated

cupping. In Egypt, cupping was a remedy not only for every type of disease but also for preserving health. From Egypt, it was transferred to Greece, where the cup became a symbol of medicine. It is learned that natives of America, India, New Holland, Japan, and China have long practised cupping. This method, in multiple forms, spread throughout Asian and European civilisations. For thousands of years, all medical professionals have distinguished two types of cupping: dry and wet. While Italian physicians favoured dry cupping, European and American doctors used wet cupping, which was widely used in Western hospitals until 1832. The earliest cupping instruments were hollowed horns of animals. Modern, sophisticated electronic, electrical, and mechanised suction cups have now replaced the older cups.

It has been verified from reliable sources that cupping in Greece, Holland, Russia, and Turkey was usually performed by women. In Vietnam, the lay and semi-professional cuppers were all women. In the West, cupping therapy was part of the basic clinical skills a doctor was expected to understand and practice until the latter part of the 19th century. Some Eastern European countries, such as Poland and Bulgaria, continue to practice cupping therapy to the present day.

Synonyms

The synonyms of Hijamah or Cupping therapy mentioned in various literatures are as follows[13]:

Arabic: Hijama (wet cupping), Imtisal al-Dam bi'l Mehjam, **Bangladesh:** Singa (using horn), **Chinese:** Jiaofa (horn technique), Huoquan Qi, Dijiufo (fire jar cupping), Shuiguanfa (boiled bamboo cup with herbal decoction), Baguanfa (suction cup), Goasha (massage cupping), Shanhuofa (flash fire cupping), Dijiufo (alcohol fire cupping), **Dogri:** Kuppi, English: Cupping, **Hindi:** Singhi lagana, Singhi khinchna (using horn), Tomdi lagana (when Tomdi/bitter gourd is used), Baare lagana, Kalsiya latkana, **Malaya:** Maikum, **Sanskrit:** Raktmochan, Raktmokshan (when incision is done), Sringavacharna (when horn is used), Alabu Avacharana (when Tumbi or bitter gourd is used), **Tamil:** Moochupudi, **Urdu:** Shaakhen Khinchna (using bamboo cup), Singhi lagana (horn cupping)[14], Pachna (when an incision is given)[15].

Hijama in Prophetic Medicine

Hijama (cupping therapy) holds significant importance in Prophetic medicine (Tibb al-Nabawi), a healing system based on the medical guidance of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). Islamic traditions emphasise hijama as a preventive and curative treatment for various ailments, making it one of the most recommended therapeutic practices in Hadith literature[3,16].

Prophetic Narrations on Hijama (Cupping Therapy)

Although the practice of Hijama dates back thousands of years, its earliest documented evidence is found in the teachings of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). Several authentic Hadiths highlight the therapeutic benefits of cupping therapy[10,17-20].

- The Prophet (PBUH) stated: "The best remedy you use for treatment is Hijama." (*Ibn Majah*)
- Ibn Abbas (MAFH) reported that the Prophet (PBUH) said: "Healing is found in three things: drinking honey, the knife of the cupper, and cauterisation with fire." (*Bukhari*)
- Abu Hurayrah (MAFH) narrated: "Whoever undergoes Hijama on the 17th, 19th, or 21st of the lunar month will be cured of all diseases." (*Abu Dawood*)
- Another narration from Abu Hurayrah (MAFH) states: "On the night of my ascension (Isra), I did not pass by any group except that they said to me, 'O Muhammad, instruct your Ummah to practice Hijama.'" (*Ibn Majah*)
- The Prophet (PBUH) himself underwent Hijama after falling from a horse and spraining his leg (*Ibn Majah*).
- Anas bin Malik (MAFH) reported: "The Prophet (PBUH) performed Hijama on both sides of his neck and between his shoulders." (*Tirmidhi*)
- Ibn Umar (MAFH) narrated: "Hijama on an empty stomach is best, as it provides healing and blessings. It enhances intellect and memory. So, undergo Hijama with Allah's blessings on a Thursday." (*Ibn Majah*)

These Hadiths emphasise the spiritual, preventive, and curative aspects of Hijama, reinforcing its importance in Prophetic medicine. These narrations indicate that hijama was not only a widely practised therapy during the time of the Prophet but was also recommended for its effectiveness in disease prevention and treatment.

Sunnah Points for Hijama

1. Al-Kahil (Upper Back – Between the Shoulders)[21]
 - Most commonly mentioned Sunnah point.
 - Beneficial for headaches, hypertension, and detoxification.
2. Al-Akhda'ain (Jugular Veins – Sides of the Neck)[22,23]
 - Effective for migraines, blood pressure regulation, and sinus issues.
3. Yafookh (Crown of the Head)[24]
 - Recommended for mental clarity, stress relief, and neurological conditions.
4. Hizam al-Batan (Above the Navel – Abdomen)[25,26]
 - Helps with digestive disorders, liver health, and intestinal issues.
5. Warik (Hip Region)[27]
 - Commonly used for sciatica and lower back pain.

Sunnah Days for Hijama

17th, 19th, and 21st of the Islamic (lunar) month[28]. The Prophet said: "Whoever performs Hijama on the 17th, 19th, or 21st day (of the lunar month), it will be a cure for every disease." (*Sunan Abu Dawood 3861; Sunan Ibn Majah 3487*)[29].

Therapeutic Benefits in Prophetic Medicine

In Prophetic medicine, hijama is believed to help in:

- Blood purification and detoxification- Removing harmful substances from the body[8].
- Pain relief- Effective in treating headaches, migraines, and joint pain[6].

- **Boosting the immune system** – Enhancing circulation and overall health[4].

Scientific Validation of Prophetic Hijama

Modern research has provided some scientific backing to the benefits of hijama mentioned in Prophetic medicine. Studies indicate that cupping therapy improves blood flow, reduces inflammation, and stimulates the immune response[5,7]. While further studies are needed to establish its full medical efficacy, its historical and religious significance remains widely acknowledged in Islamic medicine.

Hijama in Unani Medicine

Hijama (cupping therapy) is a key regimen therapy in Unani medicine, rooted in Greek, Persian, and Arab traditions. Based on humoral theory, it aims to balance the four bodily humours - Dam (blood), Balgham (phlegm), Safra (yellow bile), and Sauda (black bile)—by eliminating excess or harmful substances[3,30-32].

Definition & Mechanism

Hijama involves placing cups on the skin and creating suction to evacuate morbid materials, enhance circulation, and alleviate **Imtila (humoral congestion)**[33].

Scholars' Views

- Ibn Sina: Hijama removes noxious matter near the skin (Kantoori G.H.)[13].
- Zakaria Razi: It relieves Imtila by drawing blood from superficial vessels (Razi, 1991)[13].
- Ibn Hubal Baghdadi: Facilitates Istifragh-e-Dam (blood evacuation) to reduce congestion (Ibri Hubal, 2004)[13].
- Jurjani: Initiates superficial bleeding to relieve Imtila without weakening vital organs (Jurjani, 2000).

Types of Hijama in Unani Medicine

Types of Cupping (Hijama)

Hijama can be broadly classified into two types:

1. Hijama bil Shurt (Wet cupping/Cupping with scarification)
2. Hijama bila Shurt (Dry cupping/Cupping without scarification)

Hijama-bil-Shurt & Its Principal Advantages[13]

Ibn Sena writes in his treatise *Al-Qanun fit Tib* that Hijama-bil-Shurt has three advantages:

1. Hijama results in *Istafragh* (evacuation of morbid material/humours) from the particular organ where Hijama is done.
2. Conservation of *Jawhar e Rooh* (essence of the pneuma), as the latter is not evacuated with *akhlat* (humours), which are being evacuated.
3. Hijama does not interfere with the *Aa'zay e Ra'esa* (vital organs), as there is no *Istafragh* (evacuation) from these organs, which may cause weakness.

Hijama bila Shurt and Its Types

This type of Hijama involves applying cups to the body.

surface without any scarification. It may be divided into the following types:

1. Hijama-e-Ghair-Mutaharikah (Stationary cupping)³⁴
2. Hijama-e-Mutaharikah (Gliding or moving cupping)^{10,13}

Further Classification of Hijama bil Shurt

According to the need, Hijama bil Shurt is further classified into two types:

1. Hijama-i-Iztirariyah (Mandatory or essential cupping)
2. Hijama-i-Ikhtiyariah (Optional or voluntary cupping) (*Ibn Al Qaf, Gazruni, 1911*)

Hijama-i-Iztirariyah (Mandatory or Essential Cupping)

This form of Hijama is used in diseased conditions for treatment purposes, such as in cases of asthma, migraine, neck pain, arthritis, rheumatism, and gout.

Hijama-i-Ikhtiyariah (Optional or Voluntary Cupping)

This form is used only for *Hifz Ma Taqaddum* (prevention). It is best applied on lunar dates (Sunnah dates) of the month in the summer season and preferably before the evening.

Methods of Application

Both Hijama-bila-Shurt (dry cupping) and Hijama-bil-Shurt (wet cupping) can be performed in two ways:

1. When a vacuum is created using fire.
2. When a vacuum is created without fire, different means such as a suction pump or a vacuum machine are used.

According to this, there is one more classification of Hijama

1. Hijama-i-Nariya (cupping with fire)[13].
2. Hijama-i-Ghair Nariya (cupping without fire) - [Ibn Hubal; Chandpuri, 1984]

Hakim Akbar Arzani classified Hijama Nariya and Ghair Nariya, and both are further classified into Hijama Nariya bil Shurt and Hijama Nariya bila Shurt.¹³ Apart from these two types, a third type of Hijama is also mentioned by Abul-Qasim Al-Zahravi in his book, *Kitab-ut-Tasreef*, that is:

3. **Hijama-i-Ma'i** (Hijama with hot decoction of drugs) - (Ibn Sina has also used Hijama Ma'i in a case of earache, applying a glass filled with hot water around the ear).

This type of Hijama is also applied in Chinese medicine, named herbal cupping, in which a suitable herbal tincture is put into the cup, and then suction is applied. Apart from these, some other types of cupping are also used in the Chinese system of medicine for treatment purposes.

Therapeutic Applications in Unani Medicine

Unani practitioners have traditionally used hijama to treat various ailments, including:

- **Chronic pain and inflammation**– Effective for conditions like arthritis and migraines[6].
- **Hypertension and cardiovascular disorders**– Help to regulate blood pressure and improve circulation[8].

- **Detoxification and skin diseases**– Removes toxins, beneficial for eczema and psoriasis[1].
- **Mental well-being** – Used to treat stress, anxiety, and neurological conditions[5].

Scientific Validation and Modern Research

Recent studies have supported some of the Unani claims regarding hijama's effectiveness. Research shows that hijama enhances microcirculation, immune response, and pain relief, aligning with Unani principles of detoxification and humoral balance[7,35].

Recommended Timing for Hijamah

- The best season for performing Hijamah is spring.
- The optimal time for the procedure is midway through the lunar month, preferably during the second or third hour of the day[10,36,37].
- The most recommended days for Hijamah are the 17th, 19th, and 21st of each Islamic month according to the Hijri calendar.

Hazrat Anas (RA) narrated

"The Prophet (PBUH) used to have cupping done on the 17th, 19th, and 21st day of the lunar month." – [Rawah Tirmizi, Kitab Al-Tibb, H. no. 2189][13].

Renowned physician Ibn Sina (Avicenna, 980-1037 AD) elaborated on the prevailing medical beliefs of his era regarding the ideal timing for Hijamah.

The recommended time of day for Hijamah is 2–3 hours after sunrise, as this is believed to be the optimal period for the body's readiness. The renowned medieval physician Abul Qasim Al-Zahrawi (936–1013 AD) highlighted the importance of conducting Hijamah after the second or third hour of the day. His recommendation likely took into account the body's natural rhythms as well as environmental conditions that are most favourable for the procedure[38].

According to traditional practices, performing Hijamah (cupping therapy) on the 17th, 19th, and 21st days of the lunar month is believed to optimise its effectiveness while minimising the loss of beneficial humours. This is based on the idea that during these specific days, the humours are more active and can be efficiently brought to the surface[10]. It is believed that the diminished tidal impact during the first and third quarters of the lunar cycle has the least effect on the body's humours, considering that approximately 70% of the human body is composed of water. During the first quarter, these humours are thought to be deeply embedded within the body, whereas in the last quarter, they are considered to be in a relatively static state. As a result, they are not easily drawn to the skin's surface during these periods.

Sites for Hijamah

Abul Qasim Al-Zahrawi (936-1013 AD) identified several key locations for performing Hijamah (cupping): the occiput, the interscapular region, both sides of the neck, the chin, both shoulders, the coccyx, the middle of the forearms, both legs, and the heel veins. He noted that applying Hijamah to the shoulders can alleviate heart palpitations caused by excess blood and heat.

Each specific complaint corresponds to a particular site for Hijamah, as summarised below[38-41]:

Temple- for melasma, chloasma, eye diseases, and **Nape of neck** - for fetor of mouth, headache, conjunctivitis, etc. **Occiput-** for mania, giddiness, **Supraclavicular-**for glossitis, gingivitis, mumps, **Under the chin-** for mouth ulcers, stomatitis, tonsillitis, **Between the shoulder blades-** for pain in the arms, bronchial asthma, **Below mammary glands-** for menorrhagia, puerperal diseases, **Extremities-** for headache, meningitis, pyrexia, **In front of thighs-** for orchitis, leg ulcers, metritis, **Knees-** for arthritis[39,41], and **Calf muscles** - for renal colic, metritis, amenorrhea.

Mechanism of Action of Cupping Therapy

Avicenna, in his book "Al Qanoon Fil Tibb," has mentioned Hijama (Cupping) as a medical pillar for the management of over 37 kinds of diseases. Hijama (Cupping) has been used for the prevention and cure of a wide range of conditions, such as haematological disorders, rheumatic conditions, arthritis, sciatica, back pain, migraine, tension headaches, and post-herpetic pain.

Mode of Action According to Unani System of Medicine

The prime objectives of Hijama are:

1. Evacuation of morbid matter (*Tanqiya-e-Mawad*)
2. Diversion of morbid matter to the associated organ (*Imala-e-Mawad*)[10-15].

Modern Concept of Hijama (Cupping Therapy)

Hijama (cupping therapy) has evolved from a traditional healing practice into a scientifically recognised complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) technique. Modern research has explored its physiological effects, mechanisms, and clinical benefits, leading to its integration into pain management, sports rehabilitation, and chronic disease treatment.

Mechanism of Action in Modern Science

Several theories have been proposed to explain how cupping therapy exerts its effects. The precise mechanism through which this therapy influences various medical conditions, especially those that do not respond well to conventional treatments, remains an area of ongoing research. Different perspectives attempt to shed light on its therapeutic benefits, and some of the most significant theories are discussed below to provide a clearer understanding of how cupping therapy might work[10,42,43,8].

The Traditional Chinese Medicine Perspective on Cupping Therapy

Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) explains cupping therapy as something that could benefit from modern scientific reinterpretation. In TCM, it is believed that illnesses arise due to stagnation or blockages in the body's vital energy, known as Qi. According to this view, cupping therapy works by unblocking Qi and restoring its natural flow, thereby re-establishing balance and promoting overall health[44].

Pain Gate Theory

This theory suggests that pain signals are transmitted from their source to the brain through specific gates or channels in the body. When a vacuum cup is placed over these channels, the induced pain interferes with the original pain signals, blocking their transmission through the same pathway. This interference effectively reduces the perception of pain[42].

Prostaglandin Theory

Prostaglandins, which are by-products of inflammation, play a role in transmitting pain signals to the brain. Wet cupping therapy removes these inflammatory substances from the body, thereby alleviating pain[42].

Endorphin and Enkephalin Production Theory

Endorphins and enkephalins are natural substances released within the body, often referred to as "endogenous pleasure substances." These components help reduce pain and improve mood, making them essential for pain management during cupping therapy[42].

Taibah Theory[8,43,45]

A groundbreaking scientific theory explaining the medical benefits of Hijama (wet cupping therapy) was proposed by Salah Mohamed El Sayed from the Department of Medical Biochemistry at Suhag University, Egypt. Known as the Taibah Theory, this concept was detailed in the May 2013 issue of the journal *Alternative and Integrated Medicine* and is currently regarded as the most accurate scientific explanation of Hijama's therapeutic effects.

Salah named the theory "Taibah" after one of the names of Madinah Munawwara, the city of the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), in present-day Saudi Arabia. Taibah, meaning "clean," "pure," or "excellent," reflects the city's ability to purify its inhabitants and repel those with ill intentions. Similarly, the theory illustrates how Hijama purifies the body by removing harmful substances.

Taibah Theory describes Hijama as a minor surgical excretory procedure, drawing parallels to the kidney's glomerular filtration process and the drainage of abscesses. It explains how pathological substances, such as disease-causing agents, are removed from the body through this procedure.

Applications in Modern Medicine

1. Pain Management

- Effective in treating lower back pain, neck pain, osteoarthritis, and migraines[5].
- A meta-analysis concluded that wet cupping significantly reduces musculoskeletal pain compared to standard treatments[35].

2. Sports Medicine and Rehabilitation

- Used by athletes to enhance muscle recovery, reduce inflammation, and improve flexibility[8].
- Elite athletes, including Olympians, have used cupping for injury prevention and rehabilitation[3].

3. Treatment of Chronic Diseases

- Helps in managing hypertension, diabetes, and cardiovascular diseases by reducing blood viscosity and improving circulation[46].
- Beneficial for autoimmune disorders like rheumatoid arthritis by modulating the immune response[4].

Table no. 1: Modern Scientific Studies on Hijama

Study	Findings
Cao <i>et al.</i> (2012)	Cupping therapy significantly reduced chronic pain and inflammation in osteoarthritis patients[1].
Kim <i>et al.</i> (2011)	A systematic review showed cupping was effective for pain relief compared to standard therapy[2].
El Sayed <i>et al.</i> , (2013)	Wet cupping improved blood circulation and detoxification in hypertensive patients[47].
Aboushanab TS <i>et al.</i> (2013)	Cupping therapy reduced muscle soreness and oxidative stress in athletes[48].

Safety and Standardisation in Modern Medicine

- WHO recognises cupping as a safe complementary therapy when performed under sterile conditions[49].
- Countries like China, Germany, and the UK have integrated cupping into complementary healthcare systems[50].

CONCLUSION

Hijama (cupping therapy) has been a longstanding therapeutic practice in Unani and Prophetic medicine, and it is now gaining recognition in modern healthcare. This review traces its historical significance, theoretical foundations, and traditional applications in disease prevention, detoxification, and physiological balance.

Contemporary research explores its mechanisms, including pain relief, improved circulation, immune modulation, and detoxification. While emerging evidence supports its therapeutic potential, challenges persist in standardisation, safety, and clinical integration. Further interdisciplinary

studies are needed to validate its efficacy and optimise its role in evidence-based medicine. With continued research and refinement, hijama may contribute significantly to integrative healthcare and chronic disease management.

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