



The Art and Science of Gua Sha

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STRONGHOUSE
CONTINUING EDUCATION

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Learning Objectives

Gua sha is an integrative therapy that involves gliding a smooth-edged instrument known as a gua massage tool over the client's skin to improve circulation, reduce inflammation, increase range of motion, and relieve chronic pain.

During this 4 hour course, attendees will learn:

1. The history of Gua Sha
2. How to approach a client about receiving Gua Sha
3. Post session care for the client
4. The indications and contraindications of Gua Sha
5. How to care for your tools
6. How to integrate this bodywork modality into a massage session, while staying within our scope of practice.

This class will focus on applying Gua Sha to a client's back, hips, neck, arms, and legs for addressing the soft tissues of the body including the fascia and musculoskeletal system. A gentle version that can be used on the face as a facial technique will be discussed.

*Massage tables, linens, and lubricant for the skin are required for this course. Gua Sha "spoons" will be provided for all attendees.

Learning Outcomes

Attendees will be able to:

- Clearly explain and demonstrate how to communicate with a client about the benefits of Gua Sha
- Clearly explain and demonstrate how to communicate with a client about post session care
- Clearly explain and demonstrate when Gua Sha is indicated during a session
- Clearly explain and demonstrate when Gua Sha is contraindicated
- Clearly explain and demonstrate how to confidently integrate this bodywork modality into a massage session, while staying within our scope of practice

What is Gua Sha?

Gua sha is an important hands-on medical treatment that has been used throughout Asia for centuries. Gua means ‘to rub’ or ‘press stroke. Sha is a term that describes the blood congestion in surface tissue in areas where the patient may experience stiffness and pain; sha is also the term for the little red dots that are raised from applying Gua sha (Nielsen 2012). When Gua press-stroking is applied in repeated even strokes, sha appears as small red dots called ‘petechiae’ and the pain immediately shifts. In minutes the small red dots fade into blended reddishness. The sha disappears normally two to three days after treatment. The color of sha and rate of fading can indicate important information about a patient’s condition. Pain relief lasts even after the sha is completely gone.

Research has shown that Gua sha causes a four-fold increase in microcirculation of surface tissue (Nielsen et al. 2007) and can reduce inflammation and stimulate the immune system (Braun et al. 2011; Chan et al. 2011). Gua sha upregulates heme-oxygenase-1 (HO-1), that acts to reduce internal organ inflammation, for example, in cases of asthma, hepatitis and liver disease.

The patient experiences immediate changes in stiffness and pain with increased mobility. Because Gua sha mimics sweating, it can help to resolve fever. Gua sha cools the patient who feels too warm, warms the patient who feels too cold, while relaxing tension and reducing anxiety. Acupuncturists and practitioners of traditional East Asian medicine consider Gua sha for any illness or condition where there is pain or discomfort, for upper respiratory and digestive problems, and any condition where touch palpation indicates there is sha.

Why can Gua Sha leave marks on the skin?

The application of Gua Sha creates a vacuum that brings everything that is directly underneath it to the surface. Stronger or deeper Gua Sha techniques can create enough of a “therapeutic trauma” to the area that petechiae can form. Often even light techniques can create diffuse red marks on the skin.

When working with the face, you don’t want to leave a mark. You are with the lymphatic system

If the skin starts to get pink or red, it's too firm and is not working on the lymph system. Lymph responds to light pressure because it is close to the surface.

It's not a bruise...

The marks or *petechiae* that can form on the skin can be rather startling. It is so important to explain what can happen while integrating Gua Sha into a session, and why the color is there.

The simplest and cleanest way to explain the marks to the client is that the longer the area has been stuck, or not moving correctly, the deeper the color can be.

Where There Is Dysfunction, There Is Discomfort

The Causes of Discomfort

- Relationship issues
- Change of Season
- Age
- Environmental
- Daily Habits
- Emotional tendencies
- Posture
- Assault
- Illness
- Accident

The Effects of Gua Sha on the Human Body

The Scraping creates a powerful lifting action on the skin and the tissues directly underneath, and it increases blood circulation in the area being addressed

- Skin
 - Rise in temperature
 - Better functioning of sebaceous and sweat glands and other tissues of the skin
 - Strengthens renewing power of the skin
- Lymphatic system
- Nervous system
 - Stimulates the sensory nerves
 - Stimulates the parasympathetic nervous system
- Golgi Tendon Organs
- Muscle Spindles
- Fascia

Indications for Gua Sha

- To open a perceived sense of “blockage” in either the physical or emotional sense.
- To create flexibility

- Clear energy stagnation
- Relief of musculoskeletal pain and tension
- Assist in relieving symptoms of the common cold/flu
- Help create ease in breathing
- Release scar tissue
- Skin health

A research study from 2019 states that “Gua Sha therapy can facilitate weightlifting ability, reduce perceived exertion, and inhibit muscle injury by promoting recovery from fatigue caused by normal weightlifting training. Gua Sha therapy could be an effective treatment to complement normal weightlifting training.”¹⁶

Contraindications for Gua Sha

- Severe Disease
- Pregnancy (abdomen, low back, and lower leg)
- Cancer
- Hemophilia
- Fractures
- Herniated Disc
- Renal failure or history thereof
- History of cirrhosis of the liver
- Heart disease or history thereof
- Uncontrolled High Blood Pressure
- Diabetes
- Sunburn
- Edema
- Weak, ulcerated or broken skin
- Varicose Veins
- Hernia
- Fever
- Phlebitis
- Energy Depleted Clients
- Clients on blood thinning medication (anti-coagulants)
- Pregnancy

How to use your Gua Sha tool

- Get some skin in the game!!
- Keep your client’s skin well lubricated
- Relax your grip
- Be mindful of speed bumps
- Follow the contour of the body

Application of Gua Sha

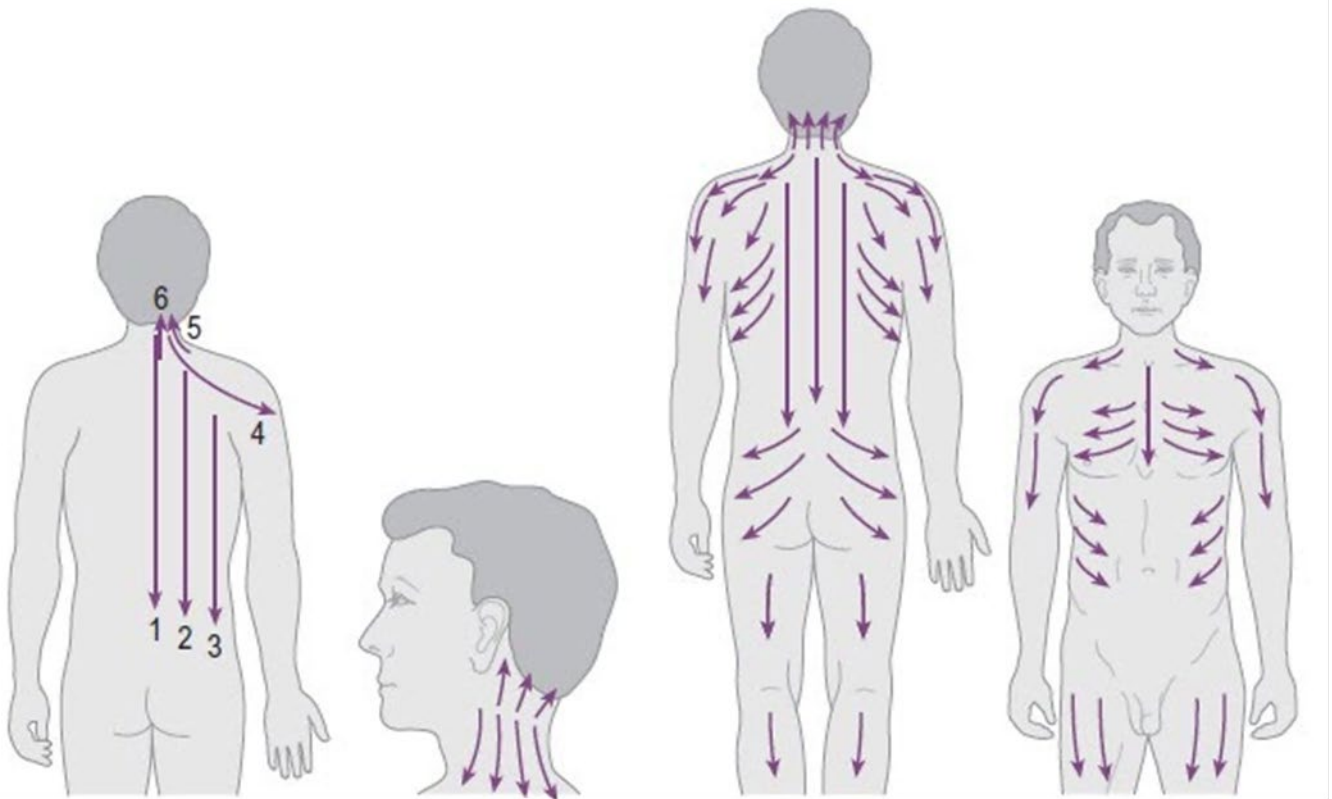
“The directionality of manual therapy has specific response. Acupuncture needle rotation that is unidirectional produces more torque in the connective tissue and necessitates greater withdrawal force than bidirectional needle rotation, which is also connective-tissue responsive but dose-dependent (Langevin et al. 2007). What effect repeated unidirectional mechanics has on connective tissue, or how the effect is transferred throughout the system, is hypothesized based on recent connective tissue research, and discussed as a model below (Nielsen 2012).

One potential mechanism is the formation of nitric oxide, discussed below in terms of its role in pain modulation: Endothelin-1 (ET-1) and endothelial constitutive nitric oxide synthase (ecNOS) mRNA expression has been shown to be time- and mechanical force dependent (Ziegler et al. 1998b). Specifically, the effect of unidirectional force or stress differs from oscillating or alternating force or stress in vascular endothelium (Ziegler et al. 1998a). Gua sha is always applied with unidirectional stroking.

Moreover, blood circulation is predominantly unidirectional throughout the system while capillary beds have at least some bidirectional interaction with the surrounding tissue. Since unidirectional needle mechanics produces unique fibril activity in the connective tissue, it may be that for certain conditions the direction and kind of mechanical intervention is specific: that unidirectional press-stroking force may invigorate blood flow and fascial mechanics differently than oscillating press force. In fact, Standley and Meltzer (2008) show that anti-inflammatory cytokine secretion is activated by directionality of myofascial release: pressure and shear that create uni-axial fibroblast strain can account for improved range of motion (ROM), decreased edema, reduced analgesic requirements and ‘long-term benefits despite short-term treatment.’¹⁴

Above, through and below' rule

Always start the stroke above the area to be treated. When Gua sha is complete, sha should extend to below the area of interest . This is the 'above, through and below' rule. Note that an area of treatment might be quite large, and the rule does not mean the stroke itself should extend beyond 4-6 inches. A stroke that is too long discourages expression of sha petechiae. 'Above, through and below' means that collectively the sets of stroke lines will include above, through and below the area of interest.



How to work with the face

Starting on the right side...

- Down the neck: Start at the outer corner of the jaw, near the earlobe. Sweep down to the dip above the middle of the right collarbone. Repeat 3 to 5 times.
- Under the chin: Sweep from the middle of the soft under-chin (where a double chin would show up) out to the bottom of your earlobe 3 to 5 times.
- Chin: From the middle of the chin, under the lower lip, sweep out to the earlobe 3 to 5 times.
- Cheek: Sweep from the corner of the nose out to the middle ear 3 to 5 times.
- Under-eye: Be especially light and slow here, sweep over the under-eye area, where "eye bags" would show up, and out to the temple, all the way to the hairline 3 to 5 times.
- Under eyebrow: Avoid any pressure on the eye or eyelid itself and stay on the brow bone. Sweep from inner corner out to temple again 3 to 5 times.
- Third eye: Stroke from center of eyebrows up to hairline. This one is especially relaxing for the nervous system and great for insomnia, so do more strokes if it speaks to you! 3 to 10 times.
- Lower forehead: Stroke from center of forehead above the eyebrow out to the temple 3 to 5 times.
- Big sweep. Here we bring everything we've moved to the outer edges of the face all the way back down to the terminus, (the collarbone dip located between the center of the neck and the shoulder). Start at the center of the upper forehead, and trace down the hairline, over the temple, then curve behind the ear, and down the side of the neck to terminus 3 to 5 times.
- Repeat the whole routine on the left side!

Post Session Client Care

A client that has recently received gua sha may feel chilly, and possibly experience flu like symptoms such as general malaise, tired, dizzy, or chills.

After integrating Gua Sha into a session, a client should be advised to keep the area away from the wind, cold, and direct sun until the discoloration begins to fade. Suggest keeping the area comfortable.

Demonstration and Practice Time

Sample Handout

What is Gua Sha?

Gua sha is an important hands-on medical treatment that has been used throughout Asia for centuries. *Gua* means ‘to rub’ or ‘press-stroke.’ *Sha* is a term that describes the blood congestion in surface tissue that accumulates in areas where the patient may experience stiffness and pain; *sha* is also the term for the little red dots that are raised from applying *Gua sha* (Nielsen 2012). When *Gua* press-stroking is applied in repeated even strokes, *sha* appears as small red dots called ‘petechiae’ and the pain immediately shifts. In minutes the small red dots fade into blended reddishness. The *sha* disappears totally in two to three days after treatment. The color of *sha* and rate of fading can indicate important information about a patient’s condition. Pain relief lasts even after the *sha* is completely gone.

The benefits of *Gua sha* are numerous. It resolves spasms and pain, and promotes normal circulation to the muscles, tissues, and organs directly beneath the area that is treated, as seen in *Gua sha*’s immediate effect on coughing and wheezing. Research has shown that *Gua sha* causes a four-fold increase in microcirculation of surface tissue (Nielsen et al. 2007) and can reduce inflammation (Braun et al. 2011; Chan et al. 2011).

The patient experiences immediate changes in stiffness and pain with increased mobility. Because *Gua sha* mimics sweating, it can help to resolve fever. *Gua sha* cools the patient who feels too warm, warms the patient who feels too cold, while relaxing tension and reducing anxiety. Acupuncturists and practitioners of traditional East Asian medicine consider *Gua sha* for any illness or condition where there is pain or discomfort, for upper respiratory and digestive problems, and any condition where touch palpation indicates there is *sha*. *Gua sha* is often done in combination with acupuncture for problems that acupuncture alone cannot address.

After treatment the patient is advised to keep the area protected from wind, cold and direct sun until the *sha* fades. They are also encouraged to drink plenty of water and eat moderately.

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