

# Analysis of the Effect of Gua Sha Combined with Cupping Therapy in TCM Nursing for Patients with Shoulder Periarthritis

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**Abstract:** Shoulder periarthritis is a common disease characterized by shoulder joint pain and dysfunction, which seriously affects patients' quality of life. In the clinical treatment of shoulder periarthritis, external therapies of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) have unique advantages. This paper focuses on the TCM nursing model of Gua Sha combined with cupping therapy. By systematically elaborating on the operational process and detailed requirements of this nursing model, it further compares with conventional nursing to analyze its clinical effects in relieving pain, improving shoulder joint mobility, and enhancing quality of life. The results show that Gua Sha combined with cupping TCM nursing can effectively dredge the meridians and Qi-blood in the shoulder, dispel cold and dampness, and relieve muscle spasm. Its analgesic and functional recovery effects are significantly superior to simple conventional nursing, with high safety, and it is worthy of popularization and application in clinical nursing.

**Keywords:** Shoulder periarthritis; Gua Sha; Cupping therapy; TCM nursing; Pain; Joint function

**Online publication:** Apr 21, 2026

## 1. Introduction

Shoulder periarthritis, also known as “fifty-year-old shoulder” or “frozen shoulder”, is one of the common diseases in middle-aged and elderly groups, mainly characterized by pain around the shoulder joint and limited mobility in all directions. In the context of modern medicine, the treatment of shoulder periarthritis mostly adopts conventional methods such as analgesic drugs, physical therapy, and functional exercises, but some of these patients face problems such as limited curative effect or easy recurrence. According to TCM theory, shoulder periarthritis belongs to the category of “Bi Syndrome”, which is mainly caused by the invasion of wind-cold-damp pathogens, strain and trauma, or insufficient Qi and blood, leading to obstruction of meridians and stagnation of Qi-blood in the shoulder<sup>[1]</sup>. In traditional TCM external treatment techniques, the combined use of Gua Sha and cupping therapy is often adopted to achieve the effects of promoting blood circulation to remove blood stasis, relaxing tendons and dredging meridians, dispelling wind and cold, etc. In recent years, the number of practical

cases of combining Gua Sha and cupping therapy in the nursing of shoulder peri-arthritis has been increasing. This paper systematically sorts out the process, constructs a detailed nursing plan of Gua Sha combined with cupping therapy, and evaluates its clinical effect, aiming to provide standardized practical reference and basis for TCM characteristic nursing of shoulder peri-arthritis.

## **2. Application process of Gua Sha combined with cupping TCM nursing in the clinical treatment of patients with shoulder peri-arthritis**

### **2.1. Pre-operation evaluation and preparation**

#### **2.1.1. Patient evaluation**

First, detailed communication was conducted with the patient to understand their medical history and specific symptoms, so as to perform TCM syndrome differentiation and classification, and clarify whether the patient belongs to wind-cold-damp Bi type, Qi stagnation and blood stasis type, or Qi and blood deficiency type. Second, systematically evaluated and recorded the patient's symptoms, including the location, nature and degree of shoulder joint pain; if conditions permit, the scoring was completed using methods such as VAS (Visual Analog Scale) <sup>[2]</sup>. Third, the patient's shoulder mobility was measured and tested, such as detecting and recording the range of anterior flexion, posterior extension, abduction, internal rotation and external rotation of the shoulder joint. Finally, the patient's overall condition was observed to confirm that there are no skin lesions, infections, bleeding tendencies, etc., and verify that there are no contraindications such as severe cardiovascular diseases, excessive weakness or empty stomach.

#### **2.1.2. Environment preparation**

The nursing operation was performed in the treatment room. The treatment room was required to be quiet, warm and windproof, and the central air conditioning is adjusted to ensure the temperature is maintained at 26–28 °C to avoid the patient catching cold.

#### **2.1.3. Article preparation**

First, disinfected Gua Sha boards, special Gua Sha oil, glass cups or air extraction cups were prepared. Among them, ox horn or stone needle materials were preferred for Gua Sha boards, and Gua Sha oil was replaced with similar media <sup>[3]</sup>. Second, prepare commonly used equipment such as 95% alcohol cotton balls, hemostats, sterile gauze, lighters, and treatment towels. In addition, ensure that all instruments were used by one person and disinfected once <sup>[4]</sup>.

#### **2.1.4. Patient preparation**

The patient was communicated before diagnosis and treatment. On the one hand, explain the process and purpose of the treatment operation in detail, and let the patient understand the possible feelings such as soreness and distension, and the appearance of sha during the treatment, so that the patient can be mentally prepared <sup>[5]</sup>. On the other hand, patient's informed consent was collected and the patient was assisted to choose a suitable posture, such as a comfortable sitting position or a contralateral recumbent position, to ensure that the shoulder and part of the neck and back areas are fully exposed <sup>[6]</sup>.

## **2.2. Selection of acupoints and areas**

### **2.2.1. Principles of acupoint and area selection**

The treatment should follow the principle of “where the meridian passes, the treatment reaches”, focusing on selecting acupoints of the Three Yang Meridians of the Hand and local Ashi Points<sup>[7]</sup>. The Three Yang Meridians of the Hand include the Large Intestine Meridian of Hand-Yangming, the Triple Burner Meridian of Hand-Shaoyang, and the Small Intestine Meridian of Hand-Taiyang<sup>[8]</sup>.

### **2.2.2. Main meridians and areas for Gua Sha**

Two main meridians were selected for Gua Sha: one is from Fengchi Point on the neck along Jianjing Point to the acromion; the other is from Tianzhu Point at the root of the neck along the medial edge of the scapula to the posterior axillary line. The key scraping areas were divided into four parts: first, near Zhongfu Point in the front of the shoulder; second, near Jianzhen Point behind the shoulder; third, the area of Jianyu and Jianliao Points on the lateral side of the shoulder; fourth, the lateral side of the upper arm.

### **2.2.3. Main acupoints for cupping**

Four main acupoints were selected for cupping: Jianyu, Jianliao, Jianzhen and Ashi Points, among which Ashi Point is the tender point. In addition, auxiliary acupoints should be reasonably selected according to syndrome differentiation. For example, Fengmen and Dazhui were selected for wind-cold-damp Bi type; Geshu can be selected for Qi stagnation and blood stasis type; Zusanli and Qihai can be selected for Qi and blood deficiency type.

## **2.3. Specific operational steps**

### **2.3.1. Gua Sha operation**

First, Gua Sha oil was evenly applied to the area to be scrapped. Second, hold the Gua Sha board at a 45° angle to the skin, and a one-way scraping method was adopted. The scraping force was gradually increased from light to heavy, but it needs to be adjusted individually based on the patient’s tolerance and the occurrence of soreness and distension<sup>[9]</sup>. Third, the scraping order was clarified: first scrape the neck and upper back, then the area around the shoulder joint. For areas with obvious pain in the patient, such as Ashi Points, heavy techniques or point pressing methods should be used for key stimulation. Fourth, the scraping time was clarified: the duration of each area should be controlled according to the actual situation, usually scraping until uniform red-purple sha spots or plaques appear (sha formation), generally scraping each area 20–30 times, with the total time was controlled at 15–20 minutes.

### **2.3.2. Cupping operation**

First, after the Gua Sha operation, the residual Gua Sha medium on the local skin was cleaned. Second, the cupping operation was started, usually selecting the flash-fire method or air extraction method to adsorb the cups on the selected acupoints. The cupping time should also be based on the actual situation, with the degree of redness, purple red or a small amount of ecchymoses on the patient’s local skin, generally between 10–15 minutes. In addition, for patients with severe cold-damp or blood stasis, the moving cupping method can also be used: apply medium to the patient’s shoulder pain area, and after the cup is adsorbed, slowly move it up, down, left and right along the direction of the muscles several times until the skin appears flushed<sup>[10]</sup>. Third, during the cupping process, it is necessary to observe the patient’s situation in real time, including the changes of the skin inside the cup and the patient’s own reaction.

### **2.3.3. Cup removal and arrangement**

First, the skin at the cup mouth was pressed gently with the thumb to let air enter the cup, the pressure was released and the cup was slowly removed. Second, the skin was gently wiped with sterile gauze and check whether there are blisters or lesions in the cupping area. If small blisters appear, no treatment is needed, and the patient was absorb and recover by themselves. If large blisters appear, sterile treatment is required to avoid infection<sup>[11]</sup>. Third, after the cupping operation, the patient was communicated, they were advised to avoid getting cold water on the cupping area within 4–6 hours, keep warm, and drink an appropriate amount of warm boiled water.

## **2.4. Nursing plan and course of treatment**

### **2.4.1. Plan**

A combined nursing plan of Gua Sha and cupping therapy was adopted, emphasizing Gua Sha first and then cupping. The function of Gua Sha was used to open the interstitial spaces and initially promote blood circulation, creating conditions for cupping to dispel pathogens more deeply.

### **2.4.2. Frequency and course of treatment**

The specific treatment frequency needs to be personalized according to the severity of the patient's condition. For most patients, treatment was performed 2–3 times a week. Patients with obvious pain in the acute phase can choose a frequency of once every two days in the early stage, and reduce the frequency to 1–2 times a week after the pain is relieved. One course of treatment consists of 7–10 nursing sessions, with a rest of 3–5 days between courses, and usually 2–3 courses as the treatment period.

## **2.5. Precautions and contraindications**

During the treatment period, the operator was required to pay attention to the following matters and avoid various contraindications. First, the choice of operation force must be individualized, try to keep it within the patient's comfortable tolerance, and avoid using brute force. Second, the appearance of ecchymoses after sha formation or cupping is a normal phenomenon, which should be explained to the patient, and it will subside on its own in about 3–7 days. Third, after the treatment, remind the patient to keep the shoulder warm during the entire course of treatment, avoid blowing wind and catching cold; at the same time, encourage the patient to cooperate with gentle active functional exercises, such as pendulum exercises. Fourth, clarify the contraindications of this nursing treatment plan: when the patient's shoulder skin has ulcers, lesions, rashes, etc., or the shoulder is a tumor location, this plan should be used with caution; when the patient has symptoms such as high fever, convulsions, hemorrhagic diseases, etc., this plan should be avoided; when the patient is pregnant or menstruating, this plan should be used with caution<sup>[12]</sup>. When the patient has underlying diseases such as severe heart disease and hypertension, heavy techniques and strong stimulation should be used with caution.

## **3. Effect performance of Gua Sha combined with cupping TCM nursing for patients with shoulder peri-arthritis**

### **3.1. Significant and rapid pain relief effect**

The TCM nursing model of Gua Sha combined with cupping therapy has a significant effect in relieving patients' pain. According to practical cases, most patients reported that after 1–2 sessions of combined nursing, the sense of

heaviness and tightness in the shoulder was relieved, and their pain was significantly reduced, especially in terms of night rest pain and activity pain. According to the comparison of VAS scores before and after treatment, it can be determined that under this treatment plan, the pain reduction range of patients is usually greater than that of simple conventional nursing methods such as oral non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs, simple hot compress or low-frequency electrotherapy.

From the perspective of TCM theory, Gua Sha directly acts on the skin and meridians, which can effectively and quickly relieve the tension of local muscle fascia; at the same time, cupping therapy can further stretch the deep muscle tissue of the patient's shoulder through negative pressure suction, thereby promoting the absorption and metabolism of inflammatory substances<sup>[13]</sup>. The synergistic use of the two can achieve the conditioning goal of "pain disappears when meridians are unblocked" faster. Conventional nursing usually chooses a single target for treatment, while the combined therapy quickly intervenes in the pain pathway from multiple levels, thus showing a better pain relief effect.

### **3.2. Obvious improvement of shoulder joint mobility**

The TCM nursing model of Gua Sha combined with cupping therapy also has a significant effect in improving shoulder joint mobility. According to patient feedback, after 1–2 courses of treatment, the range of anterior flexion, abduction, posterior extension and rotation of their shoulder joints gradually increases, and the shoulder mobility is significantly enhanced, and the impact on daily actions such as combing hair, dressing and touching the back is also greatly reduced. The results of joint function scores such as Constant-Murley show that the improvement rate of the combined nursing model is better than that of the control group receiving only conventional functional exercises.

It is not difficult to find that the combined therapy not only has an analgesic effect, but also can continuously dredge the meridians and Qi-blood, eliminate the soft tissue adhesion in the patient's shoulder, thereby increasing local blood circulation and nutritional supply, and creating a good internal environment for the recovery of joint function<sup>[14]</sup>. In addition, due to the significant pain reduction effect of the combined nursing model, the effect of improving mobility is more lasting and stable, which can effectively reduce the aggravation of joint "freezing" caused by the patient's fear of pain.

### **3.3. Superior comprehensive curative effect and high patient satisfaction**

The combined Gua Sha and cupping nursing model has a more prominent comprehensive curative effect and is highly praised by the majority of patients. On the one hand, most patients reported that their sleep quality improved and their overall comfort increased after combined nursing. On the other hand, in the evaluation of TCM syndrome scores, the patients' evaluations of pain, tenderness, mobility, fear of cold, etc. are also higher than those of the conventional nursing group. In addition, since the combined nursing method is a non-drug, external physical therapy, it can avoid side effects on the patient's gastrointestinal tract and other parts.

Overall, the combined nursing method of Gua Sha and cupping fully follows the theoretical basis of TCM "holistic concept" and "syndrome differentiation and nursing"<sup>[15]</sup>. It can not only relieve local symptoms, but also act on the regulation of the body's overall Qi-blood state, especially for shoulder periarthritis of wind-cold-damp type and Qi stagnation and blood stasis type. In addition, this nursing method has the characteristics of comprehensiveness, safety and naturalness, so it has more advantages in patient acceptance and long-term rehabilitation management.

## 4. Conclusion

In summary, in the treatment and nursing of patients with shoulder periarthritis, this paper organically combines Gua Sha and cupping therapy to form a standardized process from evaluation, acupoint selection, operation to course management. This combined nursing plan gives full play to the synergistic effect of Gua Sha and cupping therapy: Gua Sha can “open the interstitial spaces and expel excess pathogens, and initially promote blood circulation”, while cupping therapy can “disperse cold-dampness and activate deep tissues”, thus jointly achieving the purposes of dispelling pathogens and dredging meridians, promoting Qi and blood circulation, relieving spasm and pain. Clinical effect observation shows that it has clear effects in relieving pain, restoring joint function and improving patients’ overall quality of life, which is superior to some conventional nursing methods. It has the characteristics of simple operation, few side effects and good patient compliance, and has the value and significance of wide promotion and application.

## Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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