STATISTICAL ANALYSIS
UDC: 616.717.1-009.7-085.837

Gua sha treatment in acute scapular pain

Kristina Kozovska[1,3] Blagica Zhu Arsovska[1, 2] Jihe Zhu[1,2]

1. Center of Traditional Chinese Medicine "Tong Da Tang", Republic of N. Macedonia;
2. University “Skopje”, Skopje, Republic of N. Macedonia
3. Massage and health center “Fizio Venus”, Radovis, Republic of North Macedonia

DOI: https://www.doi.org/10.59710/oaijoaru253246k

Abstract

In most cases of acute pain around the scapular region, the pain comes from activities or postures that weaken the muscles and ligaments, attached to it. The pain in this region ranges from sharp, stabbing or burning to more tender or achy; only felt under the shoulder blade or felt across and into the shoulder. Gua sha treatment effectively removes blockages in the blood and, in addition to being used for conditions with acute and chronic pain. This research article includes 6 patients, 4 women and 2 men, aged between 30 and 60 years, treated with gua sha for acute pain present in the scapular region. Presenting symptoms were sharp pain, limited movement in the shoulder and neck, pain radiating to the neck and shoulder, tenderness, stiffness, pain when lifting and rotating the shoulder. All patients were treated with only one treatment, with immediate pain relief. All patients returned for another deep tissue massage session a week later, but none complained of pain in the same region, and upon palpation the muscles had normal tone. Gua sha is an exceptionally successful treatment for acute upper back pain. The persistent pain is reduced immediately and the patient feels relieved immediately after treatment. With just one treatment, patients can successfully resolve upper back pain in the scapula and shoulder girdle region.

Key words – gua sha, traditional Chinese medicine, pain, shoulder, scapula

Introduction

The scapula or shoulder blade is a sturdy and flat triangle-shaped bone, forming the back of the shoulder girdle. It links the upper arm and the collar bone and enables the shoulder joint to be highly mobile and versatile and to move through its full range of motion. In most cases of acute pain around the scapular region, the pain comes from activities or postures that weaken the muscles and ligaments, attached to it. The pain in this region ranges from sharp, stabbing or burning to more tender or achy; only felt under the shoulder blade or felt across and into the shoulder.

Poor posture over time weakens the muscles in the back and puts pressure on the complex supporting network of soft tissues and fascia under and around the shoulder blades. The head down position, like looking at the phone, usually with shoulders slouched forward, strains and loosens the muscles in the shoulder blade and neck area.

The side sleeping position with the lower arm out in front of the body also pushes the scapula out and strains the ligaments and muscles under that shoulder blade. Also working on a desk in a slouched forward position weakens the large muscles in the upper back and puts extra pressure on the soft tissues, spinal discs and joints. [1]

Gua sha treatment is part of the Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM). It involves rubbing the skin with a smooth-edged tool at areas of subacute injury or energy imbalance. The tool is used to make unidirectional movements over the skin using light pressure, causing the skin to develop momentary petechiae (small, round red or purple dots caused by subcutaneous bleeding) and ecchymosis (a change in skin color similar to bruising), similar to cupping therapy.

Gua sha treatment effectively removes blockages in the blood and, in addition to being used for conditions with acute and chronic pain, it is also used for colds, flu, headaches, dizziness, fever, joint pain, musculoskeletal problems, injuries, cramps, fibromyalgia, strained muscles, functional problems of internal organs, respiratory problems such as bronchitis, asthma and emphysema, etc. It is most often used to relax sore and tense muscles and to relieve fatigue and exhaustion. [2]

Materials, methods, results and discussion

This research article includes 6 patients, 4 women and 2 men, aged between 30 and 60 years, treated with gua sha for acute pain present in the scapular region. patients were randomly selected and treated in the last 6 months of 2024 The treatments were performed in a massage and health center by a professional physiotherapist for a duration of 15-30 minutes. The duration of the treatment depends on the area and part of the body that needs to be treated. All patients were treated with only one treatment, with immediate pain relief. On palpation, spasm of the muscles around the scapula was present in all patients and they responded positively to pain when touched. All patients described the pain as sharp and stabbing. The pain was present in patients for several days to several weeks, but no more than a month.

Presenting symptoms were sharp pain, limited movement in the shoulder and neck, pain radiating to the neck and shoulder, tenderness, stiffness, pain when lifting and rotating the shoulder.

Five patients reported pain in the right scapula and one in the left scapula.

All patients have a profession that requires prolonged sitting in a seated position.

Three patients are between 30 and 40 years old and three are between 40 and 50 years old.

Petechiae and redness resulting from treatment were not visible for more than 3 days on the body.

All patients returned for another deep tissue massage session a week later, but none complained of pain in the same region, and upon palpation the muscles had normal tone.

For people who work in a sitting position, the problem is not so much the sitting position itself as it is sitting in one position for a long time and not changing position at certain periods during work. Proper adjustment of the height of the chair, the height of the desk and the height of the monitor is necessary. It is advisable to change positions every 15 minutes and take breaks every 1 hour for stretching, exercises, and movement.

When the gua sha treatment is applied, there is this characteristic redness that occurs on the skin or as it is also called Sha, although in Western medicine it is seen as an abnormal appearance of the skin, is actually an indicator that the treatment is effective. Sha and other changes in skin color are pathological factors responsible for pain in a certain region (place of the body) and when they are removed, the normal integrity of

the place is restored, with Qi and blood continuing to flow uninterrupted. According to TCM, Sha occurs when there is a blockage and stagnation in the flow of energy and blood, caused by the penetration of external factors such as Wind into the body, traumatic injuries or internal pathological conditions. According to TCM, where there is stagnation and blockage in the flow of energy and blood, there is also pain. Qi and blood are warm by nature and when a blockage or stagnation occurs, the heat manifests and concentrates in a new formation or Sha.

Gua sha is one of the fastest ways to relieve specific types of pain, as the neck and shoulder pain. It is excellent method for treating other areas of the body as well. [3]

Conclusion

Gua sha is an exceptionally successful treatment for acute upper back pain. The persistent pain is reduced immediately and the patient feels relieved immediately after treatment. With just one treatment, patients can successfully resolve upper back pain in the scapula and shoulder girdle region.

Informed patient consent

Complete written informed consent was obtained from the patients for the publication of this study.

Source of funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for profit sectors.

Conflict of interest

The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

Acknowledgement

None

References

[1] Cooper G; 7 Possible Causes of Pain Under Your Shoulder Blade; Veritas Heatlh; 2024 [/www.spine-health.com]

[2] Lee MS, Choi TY, Kim JI, Choi SM. Using Guasha to treat musculoskeletal pain: a systematic review of controlled clinical trials. Chin Med. 2010 Jan 29;5:5. doi: 10.1186/1749-8546-5-5. PMID: 20205902; PMCID: PMC2827462

[3] Walker S; Benefits of Gua Sha For Pain Relief; Cherry Blossom Healing Arts; 2023 [www.cherryblossomhealingarts.com]