

# INNER MOBILITY

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**G**ua sha and manual lymphatic drainage (MLD) are common modalities in the aesthetics space that are often paired together, creating confusion between them. As popularity gains for both, it is important to recognize their differences and understand them as separate but equally effective modalities that work synergistically to create inner mobility, maintain fluid balance, reduce inflammation, and provide a transportation network for immune cells and substances vital for cell function.

To help paint a clearer picture, examine the interconnectedness of blood and lymph and how they directly relate to the intention of both modalities, as well as how to effectively integrate them into spa services to support the function of skin and address the individual needs of clients.

## BLOOD & LYMPH

The circulatory and lymphatic systems work hand in hand to maintain equilibrium in the body. Everywhere blood capillaries are found, lymphatic capillaries are also present. In this sense, blood and lymph are intertwined like night and day and seamlessly

intersect as fluids flow through the body to ensure the healthy exchange of nutrients and waste removal within the tissue.

Lymph begins and ends as blood. With each heartbeat, nutrient- and oxygen-rich blood is sent through the blood capillaries and travels through the entire body in one minute. As blood pressure increases, nutrient- and oxygen-rich plasma seeps from the thin walls of the blood capillaries into the extracellular space where it becomes tissue fluid and bathes the cells with essential nutrients.

Once cells receive the nutrients they need, waste is excreted into the interstitial space. As tissue pressure increases, it begins to swell with the influx of plasma and waste, which initiates the action of the tiny, finger-like lymph capillaries to open and draw in the excess fluid and cellular debris. Once the fluid and everything that follows enters the lymphatic vessel, it becomes lymph. From here, it travels through the lymph vessel system at a rate of two liters per day to a series of lymph nodes where it is filtered and cleansed before rejoining the venous system and returning to the heart as deoxygenated blood. So, while the circulatory and lymphatic systems are separate and have different functions, they play supporting roles and are dependent on one another.

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### HEALING FLOW

Similarly, gua sha and lymphatic drainage are intertwined due to their direct and indirect influence on the flow of blood and lymph. Gua means to scrape or rub and sha pertains to the release of blood into the extravascular space under skin.

Gua sha is a light-to-medium touch therapy that focuses on releasing restrictions in the tissue. While sha is the intention when working on the body, it is not necessary or recommended for the face. As a treatment modality, gua sha is all about blood and affecting the circulation patterns that deliver nutrient- and oxygen-rich plasma from the blood capillaries into the tissue space.

As previously explained, an increase in blood pressure creates a chain reaction within the interstitial tissue space that indirectly influences the flow of lymph by activating the intrinsic filtration system that removes excess fluid and cellular debris.

In addition, a gua sha stone is used to manipulate the connective tissue; it helps relieve tension and restrictions that impede the flow of fluids. This is not simply gliding on the surface of skin but rather engaging the tissue in

a specific way and with the intention of creating change in the connective tissue biomatrix to allow for an influx of fresh blood and the release of stagnation within circulatory system.

### HELPING HANDS

Manual lymphatic drainage is a unidirectional, light-touch therapy that is all about lymph and supporting the internal filtration system to remove excess fluid and waste from the tissue space and transport it to the lymph nodes where bacteria, viruses, and other harmful microorganisms are repurposed, quarantined, or destroyed.

In addition, the lymphatic system is the cornerstone of the immune system and is responsible for the maturation and transportation of immune cells and immunological responses that protect the body from foreign invaders.

Manually manipulating the lymph vessel system aids in the removal of excess fluid (swelling) and cellular debris (waste), which creates space in the interstitium for the free flow of blood and the ability of nutrients and oxygen to reach the cells.

Healthy lymphatic circulation supports overall cardiovascular health and the ability for the body to utilize and receive the nutrients it needs, as well as patrol and fight pathogens that may have been released into the tissue planes. So, while they are separate modalities with different intentions and techniques, they play supporting roles and together, have a direct influence on the health of the entire body.

### SYNERGY IN MOTION

As complementary treatment modalities, gua sha and manual lymphatic drainage are somewhat cyclical in how they support the health of skin, and it can be difficult to decide when and where to include them in a treatment protocol.

To unravel the complexities, there are a few general guidelines, but it is important to note that there are no steadfast rules. Everyone's skin reacts differently, and it is important to stay



present and watch skin as it shifts and changes throughout the treatment. If one technique is not achieving the desired result, stop and try addressing it in a different way, with a different intention, pressure, and tool. Allow skin itself to be the guide.

## FOOD FOR THOUGHT

Gua sha and manual lymphatic drainage are complementary massage modalities and can be incorporated at the beginning, middle, or end of a treatment. They can be offered together, or as stand-alone services.

If there is an excess of fluid and stagnation in and around the lymphatic pathways (in front of and below the ear, under the jawline, and along the bridge of the nose) that is causing the tissue to feel spongy, appear red or blotchy, or cause breakouts due to increased congestion, start with lymphatic drainage followed by gua sha.

This allows the tissue to soften and liquify fluid that is hardened and become gel-like, impeding the flow and the ability to access the connective tissue with the stone. It helps reduce inflammation and clear the tissue of excess fluid and waste that is often the cause of most skin care concerns. The more stagnation, the less movement and ability for blood and lymph to flow.

If there is a lot of muscle tension, anchoring down, and restrictions in the tissue in the form of adhesions and knots, fine lines and deep wrinkles, dullness, or a lack of vitality, start with gua sha, along with the addition of heat to melt muscular tension and soften the gel-like fluids, followed by manual lymphatic drainage to calm inflammation and reduce puffiness.

Tight tissue does not receive fluids well, so gua sha is an excellent way to release myofascial tension and untangle the tissue to allow it to expand and contract without restriction. This allows for an increase in blood flow and subsequently, the movement of all substances vital to the health and communication between the regulatory systems of the body. Once inner mobility



is restored, manual lymphatic drainage can be incorporated as an efficient way to clear out the cellular waste that has been liberated and ready for elimination.

Holistic aesthetics is an integrative science-based approach to skin care that combines a multitude of modalities that support the natural function of skin, so while it is okay to fuse them, it is important to honor the foundation of each and learn them separately to dispel the confusion.



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