

Steam & Sauna Bathing Offers Multiple Rejuvenating & Healing Benefits

Written by The International Steam Therapy Association

Part 1

Most people laugh when they hear that the Finnish Olympic team lugs a portable sauna with them wherever they go. However, the fair-haired Nordic athletes might be doing more than simply acting out a home-sick longing for the slender birch trees and island dotted lakes of the homeland. They could be on to a secret, non-drug-induced means of giving themselves an edge in the fierce competition of modern-day Olympics.

Although most people simply consider it a pleasant means of relaxation, sweat therapy might in fact have powerful health-enhancing effects. In the test of time is any measure, steam bathing has certainly, withstood it. For thousands of years people of all cultures have indulged in the soothing warmth of sweat baths. The Romans are well-known for their elaborate baths.

The wealthy of 200 B.C. India did not consider their mansion complete unless it included a bathhouse with a steam room. The Muslim Hamman, or bathhouse, with its domed, central steam chamber is still an integral part of life in Muslim countries. A derivation of the Hamman, the Turkish bath, has been popular in Europe for centuries. Today, steam and sauna facilities are an integral part of the hydrotherapeutic offerings at European and American spas, and steam rooms and saunas are a common feature of health clubs and public pools. Yet, there is surprisingly little awareness of the wide-ranging benefits of steam and sauna bathing. There is evidence that these sweat-inducing sessions stimulate the immune system, improve circulation, and help the body to purge itself of impurities.

Hippocrates, the founder of Western medicine more than two-thousand years ago said, "Give me the power to create a fever, and I shall cure any disease." Although often misunderstood as a symptom of disease, fever actually is a part of the body's natural healing response. Steam baths, sauna and other heat-inducing treatments elicit similar healing responses in the body, and consequently are often called "artificial fevers". During a fever, the functioning of the immune system is stimulated, while the growth of bacteria and virus is forced to slow down. The production of white blood cells, the primary agents of the immune system, is increased, as is the rate of their release into the blood stream. The generation of antibodies speeds up, as does the production of interferon, an anti viral protein that also has powerful cancer-fighting properties. Apart from stimulating the immune system, fever slows down the proliferation of invading organisms by creating an inhospitable environment. At 104 degrees F, for example, the growth rate of the polio virus is reduced up to 250 times; at 106 degrees pneumococcus, a bacterium responsible for pneumonia, dies.

Part 2

Before the advent of antibiotics, syphilitics were often infected with malaria to prevent the spread of the disease. In addition, there is evidence that the frequent fevers of malaria might function as a cancer-protecting factor. Dr. Paavo Ajrola in his book, *Worldwide Secrets of Staying Young* relates the story of the Pontine swamps near Rome in Italy, which, until a few decades ago, were a breeding ground for malaria-carrying mosquitoes. The swamps were dried out, and the malaria disappeared. However, during the next decades, that area, which had before been almost free of cancer, saw an increase in cancerous diseases. After a generation, the cancer incidence level of that area had reached the level of the rest of Italy.

Malignant cells are selectively destroyed at temperatures of 106 to 110 degrees F., so the frequent fever attacks of people in the malaria-infected area might have mobilized the body's own defenses too frequently for a cancer to take hold. Although the artificial fever induced by sweat therapy does not have the comprehensive effect of real fever, it still produces a striking effect on a number of bodily processes. There is evidence that artificial fever works as an immune system stimulant by increasing the number of white blood cells in the body.

In a 1959-review of studies on the effects of heat treatments, Mayo Clinic researcher Dr. Wakim and colleagues cite findings indicating that the number of white blood cells in the blood increased by an average of 58% during artificially induced fever. Researchers also have found increases in the activity of the white blood cells during induced fever. In addition, as in the case of bodily induced fever, the raised temperature during the artificial fever reduces the growth rate of most bacteria and viruses, giving the immune system time to mobilize its own forces.

Indeed, many regular steam or sauna bathers have experienced that a good, long sweat bath at the early onset of a cold or flu can help ward off the disease before it manifests as actual symptoms. Apart from the immune system-stimulating effects of sweat therapy, many thought it as one of the most effective and painless detoxifying treatments available. Dr. Veronica Butler, medical co-director at the Raj, a health center based on principles of Ayurveda, recommends herbalized steam baths, called swedenas, to clients as part of the ancient Ayurvedic purification treatment, known as panchakarma. According to the classical Ayurvedic texts, for maximum results, a swedena or steam bath should be given while keeping the head cool and the client supine. "A swedena clears the shrotas, the channels through which the biological intelligence flows," says Dr. Butler. "If impurities clog these channels, the flow of intelligence in the body becomes more susceptible to disease."

Part 3

Heat speeds up the chemical processes in the body, making steam and sauna bathing one of the simplest and most comfortable ways to rid the body of accumulated toxins. As the pores open up and the million of sweat glands start to excrete, the body rids itself of metabolic and other waste products. Sweat contains almost the same elements as urine, and for this reason, the skin is sometimes called the third kidney. It is estimated that as much as 30% of bodily wastes are eliminated by way of perspiration. However, more than common metabolic waste products are

secreted through the skin. Natural health practitioners often notice that when heavy smokers get a steam bath for a body wrap (where the body “simmers” for up to 45 min. under hot covers), they will leave a yellow residue on the towels. Reino Tarkianinen, President of Finlandia Sauna, reports that when the company replaces sauna benches from public baths, a thick, black layer of accumulated tar can be found underneath the benches.

In Finland, research is being done on the use of sweat therapy in the treatment of people who are chemically affected. The purifying effects of perspiration could also be behind claims that steam and sauna treatments can help cure or control such ailments as acne and arthritis. Last but not least, steam and sauna bathing produces powerful therapeutic effects simply by increasing circulation. As the carrier of the rebuilding forces of the nutrients to all parts of the body, the bloodstream plays a crucial role in the maintenance of health. Steam and sauna treatments have a stimulating effect on the cardiovascular system. The pulse rate increases from 75 beats per minute to between 100-150 beats per minute during a 15-20 minute treatment. This increases blood circulation, but not blood pressure, since the heat also causes the tiny blood vessel in the skin to expand, accommodating the increased blood flow. The dilation of the capillary vessels enables the bloodstream to carry great amounts of nutrients to the skin, enhancing the nutritive status of the skin. The flushed, youthful look that steam and sauna bathers maintain for up to several hours after treatment is due to this effect. Which is the best way of taking a steam or sauna treatment? First of all, it is good to be aware of the distinction between the two.

Most people think of the heat of a sauna as dry heat and the heat of a steam room as wet, humid heat. This distinction is only partially correct. Sauna bathers in Finland splash water on the heated stones in the sauna, raising the humidity level to as much as 40%. Without that, the hot, dry sauna air can irritate the mucus membranes.

Part 4

In the hydrotherapeutic tradition used at European and American spas, sweat therapy is used in preparation for massage as a means of increasing the suppleness of the muscles and creating a deep sense of relaxation in body and mind. In the Ayurvedic tradition of India, which has gained popularity in the U.S. in recent years, steam treatments are part of the traditional purification treatment panchakarma, where they are used after massage to help the body get rid of toxins dislodged during the treatment.

Sweat treatments can also be enjoyed on their own, as a workout for the cardiovascular system, a deep-cleansing treat for the body, an immune system booster, and a soothing and invigorating refreshment for the mind. There are a few precautions to keep in mind. Because of the increase in cardiovascular activity caused by the high heat, sweat therapy is not recommended for people with heart disease or other cardiovascular problems.

Individuals with high blood pressure should first consult their doctor. In addition, the treatment is not advised for pregnant women, small children, or the elderly. Do not take a sweat treatment if

you have a fever or an open wound. If you have been working out, be sure that your body has had time to cool down before exposing it to the heat of a sweat bath. Limit treatment time to 10 to 15 minutes. Drink plenty of water or herbal tea before and after the sweat bath to replace fluids lost during the treatment. The sweat glands can secrete up to 30 grams of sweat per minute, or almost one pint per 15 minutes, so dehydration is a very real possibility if you are not careful. Fatigue and other indications of dehydration can occur with as little as 1 to 2% loss in body weight. The main thing to keep in mind is to enjoy the process.

Do not push your body beyond its comfort level; the point is not to sweat it out the longest, but to allow your mind and body to luxuriate in this health-enhancing and invigorating miniature spa treatment. Working up a sweat is one of our oldest folk remedies. "Give me an opportunity to create fever and I will cure any illness," said the Greek physician Paramenides two thousand years ago.

Today, besides creating a relaxing sense of well-being, relaxes and loosens muscles tissue, reducing daily buildup of tension and increasing muscle flexibility: -boosts blood circulation, which helps aching and injured muscles to recover faster, because the stronger the flow of blood, the faster metabolic waste products are carried off. -stimulates vasodilatation of peripheral blood vessels, which relieves pain and speeds healing of sprains and strains; -speeds up the metabolic processes of vital organs and endocrine glands resulting in a calorie loss of between 200 and 450 in a 20-minute session.

Part 5

According to Michael Marino, research associate at Lennox Hill Hospital's Institute of Sports Medicine and Athletic Trauma in New York City: "extreme heat exposure stimulates the hypothalamus, the gland that normally maintains and stabilizes body temperature to dissipate the excess heat. Heart rate increases as more blood flow is diverted from the inner organs towards the extremities of the skin. This automatic "cooling" reaction is actually a form of beneficial stress, a passive kind of cardiovascular exercise that helps to keep the body's system alert and functioning well."

The beneficial stress of heat on the heart is confirmed by physical fitness expert Bernard Gutin, Professor of Applied Physiology and Education at Teacher's College, Columbia University: "Heat acts as a form of mostly beneficial stress on the body that produces physiological changes in heightened blood pressure, stepped-up heart rate and an increase in stress hormones." According to Dr. Paavo Aviola, an author in health matters: "The sauna increases the eliminative, detoxifying and cleansing capacity of the skin by stimulation of sweat glands. A steam bath provides a mild cleansing process for the skin as certain body fluids are released through the skin. It also promotes healthy skin tone and texture due to increased blood circulation."