

Steam room vs. sauna

Steam rooms are like saunas. Both encourage you to sit in a small, heated room, and both claim your health will benefit. The big difference is in the type of heat that they provide. A sauna uses dry heat, usually from hot rocks or a closed stove. Steam rooms are heated by a generator filled with boiling water.

While a sauna may help relax and loosen your muscles, it will not have the same health benefits of a steam room. The key to the steam room's unique health benefits is the humidity.

Health benefits

A steam room can improve your health in several ways.

Improves circulation

Sitting in a steam room might significantly improve your cardiovascular health. A [studyTrusted Source](#) of older individuals showed that moist heat improved circulation, especially in extremities. Improved circulation can lead to lowered blood pressure and a healthier heart. It can also promote healing of broken skin tissue.

Lowers blood pressure

[Research Trusted Source](#) shows that in a steam room, some people's bodies release hormones that change their heart rate. One of these hormones, called aldosterone, regulates your blood pressure. When aldosterone is released from sitting in the steam room, it can help lower high blood pressure. This is part of the reason that the steam room makes you feel relaxed.

Reduces stress

Being in the steam room can also decrease your body's production of cortisol. Cortisol is the hormone that regulates the level of stress that you feel. When your cortisol levels drop, you feel more in control and relaxed. Spending a few minutes in a relaxed state not only improves your health, but also helps heal your mind and improve your focus.

Clears congestion

Steam rooms create an environment that warms the mucous membrane and encourages deep breathing. As a result, using one can help break up congestion inside your sinuses and lungs.

[Steam therapy](#) used for treating colds and sinus infections at home is controversial because of the potential to scald yourself if you do it incorrectly. But steam rooms are relatively safe in comparison, as long as you don't stay inside too long. An older [study Trusted Source](#) done on a group of children found that kids with [respiratory infections](#) recovered more quickly after steam therapy than kids who did not use steam therapy.

Do not use a steam room if you have a fever.

Promotes skin health

Through environmental exposure, all sorts of toxins can become trapped underneath your skin. Steam rooms help solve that problem by using heat to open up your pores. The warm condensation rinses away the dirt and dead skin that can lead to breakouts. As a result, you may have clearer and more even-toned skin.

Aids in workout recovery

The pain you feel after working out is called [delayed onset muscles soreness \(DOMS\)](#). Professional athletes have known for decades that heat therapy can help them recover from training workouts. Heat can penetrate deep into muscle tissue and help relieve DOMS. A [recent study](#) [Trusted Source](#) showed that moist heat works as effectively and also more quickly than dry heat in muscle recovery.

Loosens stiff joints

Warming up before a workout is critical in avoiding injury. Using a steam room as part of your warm-up could help you reach maximum mobility during activities such as running, Pilates, and yoga. One [study](#) [Trusted Source](#) investigated the effects. Heat was applied to the knee joint before activity, and as a result, the joint was far more flexible and relaxed. The results showed that heat can help reduce injury before a workout. It was also found that women especially benefitted from heat therapy on the knee joint to prevent injury.

Burns calories

When you're in the steam room or sauna, your heart rate increases. If you use a steam room after an aerobic workout, your heart rate is already elevated, and the steam room can prolong that elevation. When used correctly, [experts note](#) that steam rooms stimulate your body in ways that typical exercise does not.

Sweating it out in the steam room isn't a tool to lose weight quickly. Any weight you lose in the steam room is water weight, and you'll need to replace it by drinking water to avoid dehydration. But using steam rooms regularly as a way to burn more calories at the gym could help your diet and exercise routine be more effective.

Boosts the immune system

Different forms of hydrotherapy are known to boost immunity, and steam rooms are no exception. Exposing your body to warm water stimulates leukocytes, which are cells that fight infection. Sitting in a steam room when you're fighting off a cold shouldn't be your first line of defense, though, as there's no proof that the steam can kill a brewing infection. But using steam rooms regularly will give your bloodstream an immunity boost that could lead to you getting sick less often.

Limits and risks of steam room use

Steam rooms have plenty of potential health benefits, but they can be harmful if you overuse them. Staying in a steam room for more than 20 minutes can dehydrate you.

Steam rooms alone can't treat serious conditions. And while they can raise your heart rate and make your exercise more effective, steam rooms are not a substitute for exercise.

If you are pregnant, immune-compromised, or recovering from surgery, avoid the steam room and sauna until you get the all-clear from your doctor.

Outlook

Adding a stop in the steam room to your postworkout routine can decrease your recovery time and help you feel healthier. While steam rooms should never replace treatments that your doctor has prescribed, they are a great place to unwind and reap some health benefits while you're at it.

Always practice good steam room hygiene by wearing flip-flops, sitting on a towel, and rinsing off with a lukewarm shower to get rid of bacteria after time in a steam room.

Last medically reviewed on June 1, 2017