

Sweat your way to a healthier heart - and a better sex life - in four weeks or less

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Until a few months ago, when I thought of saunas, I thought of Scientology. It sounds like a stretch, but actually, researchers affiliated with the Church of Scientology have been studying the health benefits of saunas since the 1970s, and their findings have been impressive.

In one study, the Scientologist researchers used biopsies to measure participants' levels of toxic burden and found that after just 30 days of daily sauna therapy, their burdens went down by as much as 66 percent.

Impressive as these results are, let's face it: Scientology, in any form, just isn't met with much respect. So their sauna research hasn't made many waves in the medical community. But, thanks to a new study published in the Journal of the American College of Cardiology, the health-promoting effects of saunas might finally get a bit more of the attention they deserve.

Saunas are still great for their traditional uses: meditation and detoxification. But this new research shows that they may also improve heart function in patients with congestive heart failure. And, if it works the way the study suggests, saunas should be able to improve male sexual function, too.

Big benefits after just one week

Saunas have been around in Europe, especially Northern Europe, for hundreds (probably thousands) of years. In America, some of the earliest inhabitants developed and passed down the tradition of "sweat lodges" for both health and spiritual benefits.

But believe it or not, there are actually a surprising number of controlled studies on saunas - specifically, a type known as far infrared sauna. Far infrared saunas are sort of the "new kid on the (sauna) block," having become very popular in Japan over the past century. Far infrared saunas are a bit different than the traditional steam versions. Far infrared waves warm things without actually heating up the air in between the heat source and the object. So in a far infrared sauna, the air is warm and dry, as opposed to the humid heat in traditional saunas.

The research group's first study on the health effects of far infrared saunas took place in Japan and involved golden hamsters. (If you want a quick laugh, try picturing a hamster in a sauna.) One group of hamsters received actual sauna temperatures - usually between 105 and 140 degrees (Fahrenheit) - daily for four weeks. The control group was placed in a room-temperature sauna (it wasn't turned on) for equal lengths of time.

Chemical analysis showed greater amounts of a substance called nitric oxide synthase in the endothelial (lining) cells of the aorta, as well as the coronary, carotid, and femoral arteries of the hamsters that got the real sauna treatments. The reason this finding is so important is that increased levels of nitric oxide synthase will produce more nitric oxide. Nitric oxide dilates coronary arteries, helping to improve heart function. That's good news on it's own, but it gets even better.

More detailed analysis showed a 40-fold increase in nitric oxide synthase in the endothelial cells of the aorta after just one week. After four weeks of treatment, the increase levelled off but steadied at 50 percent.¹

With such encouraging results from the hamster study, the researchers decided to test this approach in individuals with congestive heart failure, and this is the study that caught my eye recently.

Saunas tackle congestive heart failure, atherosclerosis, and hypertension

The researchers treated 20 congestive heart failure patients with far infrared sauna daily for two weeks. They were compared with 10 "control-group" individuals, matched for age, sex, and degree of heart failure (according to the widely accepted New York Heart Association, or "NYHA," classification system).

After just two weeks of far infrared treatment, 17 of 20 sauna-treated individuals had significant improvement in clinical symptoms. Their ultrasound evaluations and blood tests were also significantly better. None of the 10 control group individuals had any change.²

Previously, the same researchers had studied 25 younger men (ages 31-45) with one or more "coronary risk factors," including diabetes, hypertension, high cholesterol, and smoking. They were compared with 10 healthy younger men (ages 27-43) who had none of these risk factors. Compared with the "normal" men, the men with risk factors had impaired blood vessel dilation. But after just two weeks of daily far infrared sauna treatments, the risk-factor group had very significant improvements in blood vessel dilation.³ The researchers wrote that these results "suggest a therapeutic role for [far infrared] sauna therapy in patients with risk factors for atherosclerosis."

Given the hamster-in-the-sauna results, it's very likely that the improved blood vessel dilation in the men with cardiovascular risk factors resulted from higher levels of nitric oxide synthase.

Although none of the studies have measured it specifically, far infrared sauna therapy will very likely lower blood pressure for many individuals too. This theory makes sense, since the mechanism of action is the same as in congestive heart failure: An increase in nitric oxide dilates blood vessels and lowers blood pressure. If the studies I mentioned above are any indicator, it shouldn't take long to find out, either, since the effects in both hamsters and humans occurred in just two to four weeks.

And even though there's no clinical proof yet, I also think it's very likely that combining the amino acid L-arginine (another precursor of nitric oxide) with far infrared sauna therapy would produce even better results than either therapy alone - whether you're using it for hypertension or congestive heart failure.

Add some heat to your sex life

There's one more potential benefit of far-infrared sauna therapy that I've saved as the proverbial "icing on the cake." This one actually applies mostly to us guys: If it does, in fact, increase nitric oxide levels, regular far infrared sauna therapy could improve male sexual function significantly, too.

By now, pretty much everyone with a TV has heard of the patent medicine Viagra. It artificially inhibits the enzyme that normally breaks down nitric oxide, resulting in higher nitric oxide levels.

Under the right circumstances, that extra nitric oxide helps to dilate key blood vessels serving the penis, and erectile function improves.

L-arginine (the precursor for nitric oxide) works in the same way, although usually not to the same degree. But if you combine L-arginine with far infrared sauna therapy, you should get an even better result than with L-arginine alone. And, again, it'll only take a month (or less) to get results.