

HEALTHmatters

Spring Cleaning by Sauna

by Tim Keim



We've all heard the old adage: Cleanliness is next to godliness. This is true not only of our external body, but our internal environment as well.

So, the focus of this piece is the tidiness of those miles of large and small vessels that transport the blood, plasma, lymph and the micronutrients they contain. It is the condition of these vessels and the purity of our blood that dictates the quality and length of our lives.

Ancient peoples all over the world have reveled in the use of sauna and steam baths for relaxation and any number of health benefits for thousands of years. Now, medical evidence is emerging to confirm that our ancestors were right about the exhilarating benefits of heat.

Results from recent studies carried out by clinical cardiologist, Jari Laukkanen, MD, PhD, at the University of Eastern Finland showed the ability of sauna bathing to reduce the occurrence of heart disease and Alzheimer's Disease.

The subjects of this multi-decade long study were 2300 men aged 42-60 from Eastern Finland where men have "among the highest rates of heart disease in the world..." The medical team took into account major health indicators like smoking, alcohol consumption and blood pressure. Other factors considered were age, body mass index, systolic blood pressure and previous disease factors like diabetes and heart disorders.

The sauna bathing habits of these subjects was broken down into three categories: men who took sauna once per week, 2-3 times per week and 4-7 times per week. The average stay in the sauna was fifteen minutes.

The evidence shows that the frequency of sauna bathing made a significant difference in outcomes for disease risk. Men who relaxed in the sauna 4-7 times per week experienced more benefit: 66% less chance for dementia and a 65% less chance for developing Alzheimer's Disease.

In a previous study focused on heart disease Laukkanen says "we studied how frequency and duration were associated with cardiovascular outcomes...we also had quite consistent results compared to our dementia study. We found that the risk of sudden cardiac death and fatal cardiovascular events was significantly decreased in men who had the sauna more than 4 times per week. There was also very clear risk reduction."



Some reasons for these apparent benefits could be that sauna raises heart rate to levels experienced during moderate exercise. Evidence also shows that sauna has a beneficial effect on the endothelial cells that line the vessels of the heart. These cells are responsible for vasoconstriction and vasodilatation, thus their affect on blood pressure. Indeed, the study also demonstrated that men who took sauna 2-3 times per week reduced their chance of high blood pressure by 24%.

Though not rooted in empirical information, many of Laukkanen's subjects reported deeper sleep after sauna use. Science has already shown that high quality sleep has a myriad of benefits to human health.

As heat generally dilates tissues of the body, Laukkanen's findings are also in agreement with ancient sciences like Ayurveda, the medical system of yoga that promotes sweating to loosen toxins so they can be more readily excreted.

These two studies by Laukkanen and the sauna habits of humans throughout history offer tantalizing confirmation that we have yet another powerful tool to deploy in our quest to increase the length and pleasure of our lives.

Additionally, there are ways to enhance the benefits of sauna treatment. Modern researchers also comprehend the blessing of diaphoretic (sweat causing) plant medicines to eliminate toxins from the body. They are divided into warm and cool plants that encourage the body to sweat and rid itself of toxic biofilm that coats our arteries and tiny micro vessels throughout the body. (*Principles of Ayurveda*, p 372 Marc Halpern)

The warm diaphoretics include ginger, basil, cloves, black pepper and cinnamon. The cooler plants are peppermint, chrysanthemum, coriander, burdock and echinacea. So, if you tend to have a cooler body temperature or tend to be overweight, use the warmer herbs and vice-versa. Remember, that slimmer people with smaller frames should generally use these techniques less often.

These plants should be used judiciously as overuse may cause dehydration. A general guideline would be body mass index. If one is overweight, these plants may be used 2-3 times per week while using a sauna or a hot bath. One cup of tea made from 1/2-1 teaspoon of these dried herbs will produce a profuse, cleansing sweat. Listen to your body to see how you feel while using these plant medicines.

Also, now that springtime is practically here, the use of lots of fresh green vegetables will further heighten the strategies above. Spinach, kale, collards, mustard, turnip greens, creasy, parsley, et cetera which represent the bitter taste are superior cleansers of the blood, plasma and lymphatic fluid.

Happy Spring cleaning!

Pittsboro resident, Tim Keim, is an IAYT certified yoga therapist, Ayurvedic health counselor, author and speaker.

MINDFULNESS

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exhale through the mouth a few times to get relaxed). Then breathe in through the nose for a count of four, pause for a moment at the top of inhale and gently breathe out through the nose to a count of four (over time you can do a longer exhale to six or eight counts, which tends to relax the nervous system). Continue this cycle for a minute or more and then build up to 3 minutes or more.

Don't try to stop your thoughts, notice them and then keep returning to the breath. Visualize thoughts as passing clouds over your mental landscape.

There are lots of apps (many are free or free for 30 days) and places online to investigate mindfulness and meditation.

I hope you'll consider adding these powerful tools to your writer's toolkit.

Michele Tracy Berger is a scholar and creative writer. She is founder of The Creative Tickle®, a creativity coaching practice. She'd love to answer your question about the creative life in a future column. Contact her: mtb@creativetickle.com

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SECURE ACT

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- A new tax credit of up to \$500 is available for employers that launch a SIMPLE IRA or 401(k) plan with automatic enrollment. The credit applies for three years.

- With regards to the new mandate to permit certain part-timers to participate in retirement plans, employers may exclude such employees for nondiscrimination testing purposes.

- Employers now have easier access to join multiple employer plans (MEPs) regardless of industry, geographic location, or affiliation. "Open MEPs," as they have become known, offer economies of scale, allowing small employers access to the types of pricing models and other benefits typically reserved for large organizations. (Previously, groups of small businesses had to be affiliated somehow in order to join an MEP.) The legislation also provides that the failure of one employer in an MEP to meet plan requirements will not cause others to fail, and that plan assets in the failed plan will be transferred to another. (This rule is effective for plan years beginning on or after January 1, 2021.)

- Auto-enrollment safe harbor plans may automatically increase participant contributions until they reach 15% of salary. The previous ceiling was 10%.

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