

Why 'Sauna Bathing' Might Be the Secret to Riding Longer and Stronger

bicycling.com/health-nutrition/a22692451/benefits-of-a-sauna

August 10, 2018

Feel yourself slogging through sweltering rides? You may want to add this to your training routine

By [Selene Yeager](#)

Aug 10, 2018



Getty Imagesqwerty01

People have basked in hot saunas for recreation and relaxation for thousands of years. Now, a new [research roundup](#) published this month in *Mayo Clinic Proceedings* shows that “sauna bathing” is more than a good way to chill while you sweat: It may also deliver the same health benefits as exercise does.

That’s because it tricks your body into responding the same way it does when you’re working out, potentially leading to a whole cascade of physiological changes that can help protect your body from a bunch of chronic diseases, the researchers believe.

Here’s what’s going on: When you hang out in the sauna—which is generally a small wooden room heated to high temperatures by a pit of extremely hot rocks—your body responds much as it would if you were churning up a climb. Your heart rate elevates into a training zone of 120 to 150 bpm; your temperature rises; you drip with sweat, and your body pumps out hormones like noradrenaline and growth hormone. Most people spend 5 to 20

minutes basking in the heat, though experienced bathers can hang out there a bit longer.

The Health Benefits of Sauna Bathing

According to the research roundup, the more people visited the sauna, the lower their risk of fatal heart disease and general mortality. Those who hit the sauna at least four times a week also had a 66% reduced risk for dementia than those who went once a week. What's more, regular sauna use also appeared to help alleviate inflammation and the pain associated with arthritis.

Another plus? The benefits of sauna bathing may be even better if you already exercise. The researchers conclude that the combination of good fitness levels from regular aerobic exercise *plus* frequent sauna bathing provide extra cardiovascular protection.

How Saunas Can Improve Your Performance

Along with the health benefits of sauna bathing, there are also some performance boosts to consider, too—even if you are already well-trained. In one study, when a small group of well-trained distance runners sat in a sauna for 30 minutes after training four times a week, they improved their performance in a run to exhaustion test by 32 percent and decreased their 5K time by nearly 2 percent after just three weeks.

You can reap the benefits of sauna bathing anytime. But while some people like to pre-game their workout by warming up their muscles in a sauna—which helps you loosen up, but doesn't replace your regular warm up—using the sauna after you exercise, when you're still a little dehydrated, may be even better.

Related Stories

[How Dehydration Affects Your Ride](#)

[How to Know If You're Dangerously Dehydrated](#)

When you're a bit dehydrated, you have lower blood volume, explains senior research fellow Stacy Sims, PhD, of the Adams Centre for High Performance at the University of Waikato in New Zealand. When you step into the sauna, your body responds to the hot environment by sending blood to your skin, so you can sweat and avoid overheating.

Advertisement - Continue Reading Below



Because you have a limited amount of blood to go around, you have decreased blood flow and oxygen to your organs, so your kidneys stimulate the production of EPO (yes, the

Plus, jumping in the sauna post-workout is actually an endurance athlete's secret weapon for competing in the heat or at altitude, says Sims. It resets your thermoregulation thresholds, so hot temperatures feel less severe, and helps improve performance at high-altitude events, where the mountain air is very dry and dehydrating.

"Because it's similar to hard exercise, you need to use it wisely," she says. "The general guideline calls for 25 to 30 minute sessions, where the temperature doesn't exceed 165 degrees, but you should only stay in for as long as you feel comfortable. It's not a competition!"

How to Use Sauna Bathing to Boost Your Workouts

Interesting in giving it a shot? Here's how to make sauna bathing work for you.

Aim to hit the sauna for 7 days in a row for optimum results. The first day, you may only be able to tolerate 5 to 10 minutes, but by the seventh day, 25 to 30 minutes should be attainable, Sims says.

Women may respond best to a "heat primer" when acclimating to the sauna, since their hormonal cycles give them different thermoregulatory thresholds. So they may want to try to go into the sauna for 5 to 10 minutes; then exit for 5 minutes; then head back in for the rest of the session, up to that 30-minute mark.

Because your resting heart rate will be high during sauna time—about 140 bpm—try to keep your workouts less intense the week. Plan for more of a recovery or endurance week to prevent overtraining, Sims says.

Shoot for hitting the sauna within 30 minutes of completing a workout. Try not to drink during these 30 minutes—your protein recovery drink is okay, but no other fluid, since some dehydration is key to the adaptations of this technique, Sims says. You can pour some water over your neck to cool off instead.

After you're done in the sauna, slowly rehydrate over the course of 2 to 3 hours. Gulping down fluid in large amounts after sauna bathing will cancel out the heat-stress response to the kidneys, Sims says. If you're showering afterwards, make it a warm one, or wait at least 10 minutes if you want a colder one—sudden, dramatic changes in temperature can make you lightheaded.

