

Some Like It Hot

Using a sauna lets your body perspire out toxins in a state of total relaxation.

You've slaved all day at work and you're beat, or maybe you just finished at the gym and want a refreshing end to your workout. What would hit the spot? Stripping down and sitting inside a warm room. It's time for a sauna.

From Native American *inipis* and ancient Roman *laconicums* to traditional home saunas in Finland and those at five-star hotels, intense heat and naked skin have been meeting for ritual ceremony, community and sheer relaxation for tens of thousands of years. Used safely, saunas can also benefit your health.

Feel the Heat

The most common type is the Finnish sauna, which produces 194° of body-relaxing heat. Related is the Native American sweat lodge, still used by tribes as a spiritual tool, and emulated by non-natives. Both types sizzle the body by heating the air and employing water splashed on rocks to control humidity. (In contrast, steam baths use water heated to humidify the air at 100%.) Another type of sauna uses infrared light to gently heat the body's core. Because the surface of the skin isn't heated, infrared saunas can operate at lower temperatures (up to 150°) and require no water.

When you bask in the heat of a sauna, you can't help but feel relaxed. "A sauna inhibits the sympathetic nervous system, your fight-or-flight response," says Lawrence Wilson, MD of Prescott, Arizona, author of *Sauna Therapy for Detoxification and Healing* (L.D. Wilson Consultants). Your body also releases



endorphins, natural pain relievers that help alleviate soreness in joints and muscles.

Soon, your pores open and you sweat, about one pint in an average sauna session. Perspiration is your body's way of cooling itself to a normal 98.6°, and it nearly doubles your heart rate. Your blood vessels expand, carrying blood from your internal organs (where it pools when you're under stress) to your body's periphery. This kicks up your circulation, moving oxygen through your system. Meanwhile, sweat helps remove toxins, taking a load off your kidneys, lungs, bowels and liver.

"It's the combination of all these benefits that makes saunas very powerful," says Wilson. Sink into a sauna regularly (three times a week, he suggests), and the advantages increase. Your skin becomes good at eliminating toxins. Repeated heating and cooling of the body makes your blood vessels more elastic, which is easier on circulation. Your heart becomes toned, improving your overall heart rate. And burning calories from an increased heart rate can cheer on a weight-loss program.

Researchers have found that infrared sauna can reduce the pain and stiffness associated with rheumatoid arthritis (*Clinical Rheumatology* 1/09).

Smart Sauna Usage

You'll best reap the sauna's rewards when you use it properly. "Before a sauna, take a cleansing shower for hygienic reasons," urges Giselle Roeder, of Nanoose Bay, British Columbia, author of *Sauna: The Hottest Way to Good Health* (Alive Books). "Dry off well; otherwise the water droplets will have to evaporate before the body can start sweating." Make sure you haven't just eaten a heavy meal, and drink about 16 ounces of water before entering the sauna. Roeder says not to drink in the sauna because that would interfere with the removal of toxins from the fluid between your body's cells.

Using a sauna while naked is best. Kalevi Ruuska, president of the North American Sauna Society, says that sweating is "much more comfortable" without tight clothing.

"A towel would be fine, and a cloth or disposable seating protector should always be used." Adds Roeder: "Sit with your legs at the same level as the rest of your body, not dangling or the blood won't circulate well. Better, lie down and stretch out" to let your muscles fully relax.

A sauna's heat works best with cold. "Do 12 minutes of hot, then get out and take a cold rinse, using a hand-held hose or shower starting at your feet (farthest from your heart), working up," says Roeder. "Repeat hot and cold sessions two times. If you don't have a cold shower, your veins and arteries will stay expanded and you'll get no [circulation] benefit." Meditate in the heat, adds Wilson. "Close your eyes; visualize the warm, healing energy."

After your session drink two to four glasses of water, and "do some deep breathing, preferably in fresh air, to replenish your oxygen," Roeder advises. You lose some sodium from sweating, so put sea salt on your food and take three kelp capsules a day, suggests Wilson.

Be safe. It's easy to avoid the kind of

tragedy that happened near Sedona, Arizona in June, when a sweat lodge ceremony killed two and hospitalized 19. The lodge was built with plastic, which doesn't breathe, and contained too many people who, after two hours, were dehydrated.

"Make sure the sauna door opens outwards, for safety, and that the heater is a UL-listed one on a timer with an hour limit," says Ruuska. The room should be well lit, so you can see if anyone's in distress or is unconscious.

"If you have the slightest feeling of unease, get out," warns Roeder. Wilson agrees, adding, "Check with your doctor before going into a sauna if you have a heart condition, high blood pressure or diabetes." That's especially true if you have a pacemaker or defibrillator. Wilson adds that anyone pregnant or under the age of five shouldn't use a sauna at all.

That sauna at your health club, favorite hotel or home is waiting for you. When you steep in its warm embrace, you'll surrender your stress—and give in to good health. —Claire Sykes