Studies Tie Sauna Use to Longevity and Lower Risk of Death from Heart Disease

We love how saunas make us feel — now science verifies why. A new study in JAMA Internal Medicine (The Journal of the American Medical Association) links sauna use to a reduced risk for a number of cardiovascular conditions including heart failure and coronary heart disease, ultimately leading to a longer life.

Dr. Jari Laukkanen, a cardiologist at the Institute of Public Health and Clinical Nutrition, University of Eastern Finland, and his colleagues studied more than 2,300 men between the ages of 42 and 60 for more than two decades. They found that the more sessions per week men spent in the sauna, the lower their risk of sudden cardiac death and fatal coronary heart disease. The sauna also extended the life of participants with other illnesses, including cancer. Dr. Laukkanen concluded, “Our results suggest that sauna bathing is a recommendable health habit.”

“More is Better”

“There was an inverse relationship between sauna and cardiovascular disease risk, meaning that more is better. It seems that participants with more than four sauna sessions per week had the lowest risk,” Dr. Laukkanen told Reuters Health.

According to the study, participants who had two or three sauna sessions a week had a 22 percent reduced chance of suffering sudden cardiac death. Men who had four to seven sauna sessions per week had the lowest risk, according to Dr. Laukkanen told Reuters Health.

“Similar to Exercise”

The latest study shows the health benefits for the cardiovascular system apparently result from the sauna’s high temperature and low humidity. The benefits of sauna use are much like those of exercise according to the study. Sauna use increases heart rate and greatly boosts sweat levels similar to moderate exercise. Overall, sauna use also leads to “better relaxation and well-being,” Dr. Laukkanen said.

“The higher frequency of sauna bathing was related to considerable decreases of sudden cardiac death, fatal coronary heart disease, fatal cardiovascular disease and all-cause mortality,” the authors wrote. The findings of the study aren’t surprising — researchers in the past have had good things to say about saunas lowering blood pressure and helping the function of blood vessels, as well as detoxifying the body of potential carcinogens.

Dr. Rita Redberg, cardiologist and professor of medicine at the University of California San Francisco said even though the study wasn’t surprising, “There’s no physiological reason why it wouldn’t…clearly time spent in the sauna is time well spent.” While this particular study looked specifically at Finnish saunas, a decade of research on infrared saunas validates and expands upon the health benefits found in the Finnish study.

Dr. Joel Kahn, cardiologist and author of The Whole Heart Solution, says, “The data suggests that sauna may be one of the most important health habits to have to prevent and reverse the #1 killer in the Western world.” In Japan, sauna therapy is known as waon, from the Japanese words ‘wa’ for soothing and ‘on’ for warmth. In a recent article Dr. Kahn describes waon therapy protocol, “Heart patients sit in an infrared sauna set at 60° C (140° F) for 15 minutes, followed by resting outside the sauna for 30 minutes, wrapped in towels. What happens to a heart patient who enjoys this soothing warm therapy? One benefit that has been measured in research studies is healthier arteries. Waon therapy has been shown to improve the function of endothelial cells that line every artery in the body resulting in better health and functionality.”

Dr. Kahn continues, “Waon therapy may save lives. In a provocative study of 129 patients with bad heart problems, patients treated with waon therapy at least two times a week were compared to similar patients who did not get the therapy. Over five years of follow-up, the rates of re-hospitalization and death were half in the waon treated patients compared to the others. In a recent study, waon sauna therapy improved exercise capacity, quality of life, and mental capacity in patients with advanced heart failure.”

“A Sauna a Day…”

Dr. Kahn powerfully concludes, “A heart attack occurs every 45 seconds in the United States and remains one of the most frequent causes of sudden death, ripping families apart. A comprehensive lifestyle program can dramatically reduce that risk. It appears that a sauna a day keeps both the heart attack and the doctor away.”

Reference Sources and References:

- Excerpts from this article are reprinted from materials provided by The JAMA Network Journals.
- Dr. Rhonda Patrick’s site, foundmyfitness.com, and Dr. Joel Kahn’s article, Sauna: The Hottest Therapy for Heart Disease published in the Huffington Post, 9.8.2015.
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- “Brain Health”

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