

Why Saunas Are Great For Your Heart: A Cardiologist Explains

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by Dr. Joel Kahn February 28, 2013 3:43 PM

Can one of the hottest treatments to heal the heart be heat itself?

Over the last two decades, I've treated patients with advanced heart disease, and I've seen many innovations in medications, surgeries, and devices. But there is still an enormous toll on quality and quantity of life.

Heart disease is a great model to test other approaches to [healing](#) as even studies with small groups of patients may show benefits of therapy quickly.

One of the treatments which has been a relative secret but needs to be outed now is sauna therapy for heart health. And not just any type of sauna heat. Doctors in Japan have been working for over 20 years testing the benefits of infrared dry sauna therapy in some of the sickest heart and vascular patients, and they've published nearly 20 research articles showing this is a major breakthrough.

They've used a technique called *waon therapy*, from the Japanese words *wa* for soothing and *on* for warmth, or so called soothing warmth therapy. The way it works: 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. People are encouraged to drink water to compensate for the perspiration.

And what can waon therapy do in heart patients that might apply to your general health?

Waon therapy improves the health of arteries.

The lining of your arteries is a single layer called your endothelium. Acting much more than a simple barrier for blood cells, these cells produce dozens of compounds that cause arteries to resist developing plaque, blood clots or constriction. Waon therapy has been shown to improve the function of these cells and the blood flow they carry.

Waon therapy lowers the “fire” in your body.

Whether you have a disease, eat junk and processed food, are stressed or are overweight, your blood is filled every day with molecules triggering [inflammation](#) and destructive processes. When measured after a few weeks of waon therapy, the levels of these molecules decrease whether in patients with heart disease or just the “average joe” living the stressed Western lifestyle.

Waon therapy improves exercise ability.

A hallmark of heart disease is the reduced ability to exercise. Perhaps due to a [healthier](#) endothelium and less inflammation, after treatments with waon therapy people demonstrate a greater ability to walk, whether limited by heart or leg vascular issues.

Waon therapy may save lives.

In an amazing 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 soothing warmth therapy. Over five years of follow-up, the rate of rehospitalization and death was half in the waon treated patients compared to the others! If a drug reduced hospitalization and death by 50% in these patients it would easily be a billion dollar winner.

If waon therapy is so beneficial in heart patients why haven't you heard of it? And why isn't it used more?

In my opinion, it's partly due to the fact that many doctors aren't familiar with the strong data supporting it, and partly due to the fact that low-tech treatments such as this one get buried by expensive and glitzy therapies that may not prove to be beneficial.

Patients have used health accounts to cover the cost of sessions or even to buy their own units so it can be in reach of many people. And even if you can't get to an infrared sauna, you can probably get many of the same benefits from a traditional sauna (though there's more data supporting the waon treatment).

Is it beneficial for those of us avoiding heart disease? I cannot promise it, but as my mother used to say when I was a child about the healing properties of chicken soup, it couldn't hurt!

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