Turn Up the Heat: Infrared Sauna Therapy for Pain Relief

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As a holistic chiropractor running a wellness center in Kansas, I have many patients show up in their last-ditch effort to find relief from chronic pain. My practitioners and I can offer them hands-on treatment (chiropractic adjustments, acupuncture needling, clinical yoga, therapeutic massage), which are all of course helpful. Yet I have found that using a full-spectrum infrared sauna in my office as part of a treatment plan for pain has contributed to my patients' pain relief exponentially while also boosting revenue for my practice.

Instead of using convection heat, as is the case in conventional saunas, infrared saunas utilize infrared light waves to warm the body. The infrared spectrum is invisible to the human eye, penetrating deeply into the body's tissues for a deeper core sweat. Infrared is the safest form of heat, naturally occurring in sunlight, and is used in hospital incubators for newborn babies.

Photo courtesy Sunlighten saunas
www.sunlilghten.com

The Research

In terms of chronic pain relief, the results of every study I could find on infrared sauna treatment were significantly positive. In a 2006 double-blind, placebo-controlled study in the *Journal of Pain Research and Management*, researchers found that infrared heat therapy was able to reduce chronic low back pain by 50 percent over seven weeks, with zero negative side effects. Participants were asked to rate their overall pain without movement, as well as pain during various movement postures such as bending forward, back, right and left, and rotating the spine. All measures of pain were reduced approximately in half and showed the greatest reduction toward the end of the seven-week period. This suggests that continuing treatment beyond seven weeks may lead to even greater pain reduction, which is what I have discovered anecdotally with patients at my wellness center. The results of this study were highly significant ($P<.0001$ both for the within-group comparison and as compared with placebo group.>

In a compelling study in a 2002 issue of the *Spine Journal*, a researcher at the New Jersey Medical School found that heat therapy was more effective than analgesics for low back pain relief. This was a six-month study with 371 participants divided into a heat-therapy group and an analgesic group. Pain relief was significantly greater in the heat group as early as the first day of treatment, and the effects of heat therapy lasted more than 48 hours after treatment.

When I was working as an independent chiropractor, I used to have to turn patients away who suffered from arthritis. Had I possessed an infrared sauna in my office back then, that would not have been the case, because infrared heat has been proven to help with several forms of arthritis. In a 2008 study in the *Journal of Clinical Rheumatology,* researchers found that reductions in both pain and stiffness were statistically significant after only four weeks of treatment for both rheumatoid arthritis and ankylosing spondylitis.

In addition, the *Journal of the American Geriatrics Society* (1992) reported pain reduction and increased ability in elderly patients suffering from degenerative osteoarthritis (DOA) of the knee who were treated with infrared heat. DOA is the most common form of arthritis, and autopsy surveys show that the joints begin to deteriorate early in life and continue throughout one's lifetime.

Using roentgenography, osteoarthritic decline can be found in 4 percent of people under age 24 and 85 percent of people 75-79 years old. This double-blind study on DOA demonstrated pain reduction for the treatment group by more than 50 percent, with no significant pain reduction in the placebo group. Although the study lasted only 10 days, individuals in the treatment group reported no need for analgesics (due to being pain-free) for two months to one year.

One of the potential mechanisms by which infrared heat reduces pain is by increasing endorphin release and decreasing the stress response. In a 1994 study published in the *Laser Therapy Journal*, B-endorphin levels were significantly raised and plasma ACTH levels were significantly reduced as a result of infrared heat therapy. This change in hormone levels due to infrared heat therapy has been shown to also have an effect on mood and productivity. In an exciting study in the *Journal of Psychotherapy and Psychosomatics* (2005), Japanese researchers divided individuals with chronic pain into two groups: Group A received cognitive-behavioral therapy and rehabilitative physical therapy; Group B received cog-b and rehab, plus infrared sauna treatments every day for four weeks.