Saunas are good for the heart

Submitting your body to a slow cook can be a smart move. Men who take saunas often run a lower risk of dying from cardiovascular diseases. The healthy factor could be linked to the relaxed body and mind a sauna instils on users.

Hot, relaxing, sweaty and communal. The sauna is essential to Finnish culture. So it isn’t surprising that Finnish scientists have spent time investigating the effects of their saunas.

A new study plunges into the steamy clouds to see whether saunas have any effect on male mortality.

All the men in the study were users of saunas. The researchers wanted to see if they could find statistical differences between those who spent lots of time in saunas and the more infrequent users.

The more often, the better

In the 1980s they asked a random selection of 2,315 middle-aged men from Eastern Finland about their sauna habits. Then, 21 years later, they looked at who was alive and who wasn’t.

It turned out that the mortality rate of men who took a sauna once a week was higher than those who indulged in the heat treatment two or three times weekly. Aficionados who baked themselves from four to seven times a week ran even lower risks of death.

The safeguards provided by saunas were not only warding off cardiovascular diseases and heart attacks. The frequent users were less likely to die of other causes as well.

Valuable time spent

The length of time spent in a sauna also factored in.

The men who spent more than 19 minutes in the sauna each time ran only half the risk of dying from cardiac arrest as those who only withstood in the roast less than 11 minutes per sauna visit.

But the amount of time spent in the sauna had no impact on general mortality rates.

The men who took saunas most often tended to use them at lower temperatures. The temperature of average sauna in the tests was 80° C. The enthusiasts who visited saunas at least four times a week kept the heat down to 77° C.

Relaxing

The researchers have factored in all sorts of things known to affect mortality rates; smoking, use of alcohol, BMI, diabetes, exercise, household incomes and education.
Even when these factors were neutralised in the equation, the men who frequented the saunas had better chances of living.

The researchers think that one explanation is that the temperature triggers a higher pulse rate and thus improves blood pressure. This has been shown in other studies. In this context, a sauna acts something like a work-out in a gym ? and a whole lot easier.

Another reason why saunas can be salutary is that the bathers relax so well in the heat, often in good company, comments the editor of the journal JAMA Internal Medicine, Rita F. Redberg.

The researchers have not investigated the mental health of the participants. There can be other qualities about the participants that the scientists overlooked or had no means of controlling. Perhaps there is something inherently special about people who want to take saunas most frequently?

More research is surely needed to find out what it is that links the sauna man to a longer life on average.

Read the Norwegian version of this article at forskning.no [7]

Saunas benefit the health of middle-aged men. Finnish saunas are hot and dry, but it?s a popular practice to pour water over the oven and energise the air with steam. (Photo: Colourbox) [8]


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