



A STEAMY SCENE

Saunas and steam baths promise purifying results

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From Turkish baths to Native American sweat lodges, the benefits of steam rooms have been embraced through the ages. These days, they're a hot and seemingly modern option at destination spas and day spas, appealing to masculine tastes and those of spa newcomers more likely to try quicker, less messy treatments.

As a hypothermic therapy, a steam bath induces an artificial fever, stimulating the immune and circulatory systems and serving as a natural method of detoxification.

When body temperatures reach the 101- to 103-degree range, pulse rates also speed up, rising from 75 beats per minute to as many as 150 and simultaneously increasing blood circulation. Heated blood vessels expand too, helping to stabilize blood pressure. The immune system increases white blood cell production, and higher temperatures typically destroy or weaken pathogens.

The body's natural response to rising temperatures is perspiration, but in a steam bath, the increased humidity blocks evaporation. As the pores open, toxins and other wastes are purged. Because sweat contains many of the same elements

as urine, the skin is sometimes referred to as the third kidney — eliminating as much as 30 percent of bodily wastes via perspiration. Besides removing the accumulation of potentially carcinogenic heavy metals, profuse perspiration helps excrete alcohol, nicotine, sodium and even cholesterol.

Moisture is the primary difference between the two types of steam bathing, wet (steam) and dry (saunas). Since perspiration evaporates in a sauna, some of the residue may remain on the skin, whereas in a steam bath, it is removed along with the sweat. Both forms have their perks, however, and 30 minutes in the sauna produces the equivalent amount of perspiration as a 10-kilometer run and burns as many calories as a 30-minute rowing session.

Steam inhalation is considered an effective treatment for respiratory conditions such as asthma and allergies as well as bronchitis and the common cold. Relieving inflammation and congestion of upper respiratory membranes, it also helps loosen secretions and soothes spasmodic breathing and coughing.

Additional health benefits include muscle relaxation, increased flexibility, tension reduction and improved skin tone. 