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Body

The sauna and the heart: what a study of Finnish men found

The study by Tanjaniina Laukkanen and Jari Laukkanen (2015), why association does not necessarily mean cause and how to use the sauna safely

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Finland has millions of saunas for a population of about 5.5 million. Many families use the sauna several times a week, not as a luxury but as part of ordinary life. This gave Finnish researchers a rare opportunity to study its long-term effects.

The 2015 study

In 2015 the researchers Tanjaniina Laukkanen, Jari Laukkanen and their colleagues at the University of Eastern Finland published the results of the KIHD study, which followed 2,315 men aged 42 to 60 for about 20 years. They grouped the men by how many times a week they used the sauna: once, two to three times, or four to seven times.

Compared with those who used it once a week, men who used it four to seven times a week had a markedly lower risk of sudden cardiac death, of death from coronary and cardiovascular disease and of death from any cause during the study period. The association was also stronger with longer sessions, about 19 minutes or more.

What we do not know

This was an observational study, only of men, in a country with a special sauna culture. Men who used the sauna more often may also have had more free time, less stress or better health from the start. The researchers tried to account for some of these factors, but not all. We cannot say for certain that the sauna causes the benefit.

> *The heat of the sauna asks the heart to work a little as during a brisk walk. But it does not replace the walk.*

How it might work

During a sauna session, skin temperature rises, blood vessels widen and the heart rate increases, in some cases as during moderate physical activity. Over time this may improve blood-vessel function and lower blood pressure. These are proposed mechanisms, supported by smaller studies.

A protected tradition

In Finland, the sauna is not a luxury but part of everyday life. In a country of about 5.5 million people, it is estimated that there are about three million saunas, in houses, flats, offices and even in parliament. In 2020 UNESCO added Finnish sauna culture to its list of the intangible cultural heritage of humanity. This widespread tradition is why Finnish studies have been able to compare people who go to the sauna once a week with those who go four to seven times, which would be difficult in most other countries.

Sauna and dementia

In 2017 Tanjaniina Laukkanen and colleagues analysed the same group of more than two thousand Finnish men and found that those who used the sauna four to seven times a

week had about a 66 per cent lower risk of dementia over 20 years of follow-up, compared with those who used it only once a week. Here too, the men who went to the sauna more often may have been generally healthier and more socially active. So the finding should be seen as an interesting signal that needs further studies, not as proof.

Women too

The first studies included only men. In 2018 Setor Kunutsor and colleagues analysed another Finnish group of about 1,600 middle-aged and older men and women. They found that people who used the sauna four to seven times a week had about a 60 per cent lower risk of stroke, compared with those who used it once a week. The link was found in both sexes. The authors suggested that lower blood pressure may be one of the mechanisms, but stressed that the study was observational.

A systematic review

In 2018 Joy Hussain and Marc Cohen systematically reviewed the clinical studies on dry sauna. They found evidence that regular sauna use may lower blood pressure, improve some measures of heart function in people with heart failure and help in some chronic pain conditions. But they also noted that many studies were small, of varying quality and without good control groups. In their view, the sauna seems generally safe for healthy people, but its benefits are not yet fully proven.

Alcohol and the sauna

The review by Kirsti Kukkonen-Harjula and Kari Kauppinen in 2006 stressed that most sauna-related deaths in Finland involved alcohol. Alcohol lowers blood pressure, weakens judgement and can cause heart rhythm disturbances, while the heat of the sauna strengthens these effects. A person may fall, lose consciousness or not realise when they should leave. For this reason, the most important safety rule is not to mix the sauna with alcohol, neither before nor during it, and to leave at once if you feel dizzy, unwell or short of breath.

How to use it safely

1. **Talk to your doctor** if you have heart disease, unstable blood pressure or are pregnant.
2. **Start with short sessions**, 5–10 minutes, and increase gradually.
3. **Drink water** before and after, because you lose a lot of water through sweat.
4. **Do not drink alcohol** before or during the sauna. This combination is linked with serious risks.

5. **Get out at once** if you feel dizzy, nauseous or have chest pain.

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