

HEALTHCARE

# If you want to fight depression, head to a sauna

Lakshmi Varanasi May 19, 2024, 10:50 AM PDT

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The sauna could be the next big depression treatment. Robert Rieger

Regular sauna sessions may help alleviate depression, a new study shows.

The study followed 12 adults over eight weeks.

11 out of 12 no longer met depression criteria after the study.

The next time you need to boost your mood: Head to the [sauna](#).

According to a [new study](#) conducted by Ashley Mason, a clinical psychologist at the UC San Francisco Osher Center for Integrative Health, [regular sauna sessions](#) might benefit individuals with depression.

Mason and her team conducted a clinical trial on 12 adults with major depressive disorder over eight weeks. They treated them with a combination of cognitive behavioral therapy and sessions in a sauna heated to about 101.3 degrees Fahrenheit for up to 140 minutes. By the end of the trial, 11 out of the 12 participants no longer met the criteria for major depressive disorder.

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One of the study's key ideas concerns body temperature. Research shows that individuals with depression often have a higher-than-average body temperature. When someone's symptoms improve, their body temperature normalizes, too.

That raises the hypothesis: If you drive up body temperatures, can you get the body's cooling systems to work faster and mitigate the symptoms of depression?

This idea has long been circulating among researchers.

A paper published in 2016 found that people with major depressive disorder who went through "infrared hyperthermia"—increasing their body temperatures in an infrared chamber—saw an improvement in depression symptoms.

Mason told Wired she was "bewitched" by those findings, so as part of her work, she and her team analyzed daily temperature readings and depression symptoms from over 20,000 people to confirm the link between the two. All participants in Mason's study also saw their body temperature increase by 1.5 degrees above the average human temperature during their sauna sessions.

Mason said there's still more research that needs to be done before she can confirm that sauna therapy can combat depression. But "a mind and body treatment with that kind of outcome is surely worthy of further study," she told Wired.

She eventually wants to gather enough clinical evidence for insurance companies to cover saunas "so that when a person with depression is considering a menu of treatment options, this is on the menu."

Some therapists are already recommending sauna therapy to their clients. "My clients have reported positive mood-enhancing benefits, including some alleviation of their depression symptoms

during and in the time after using saunas," Annie Wright, a licensed psychotherapist who's been practicing for over 14 years in the Bay Area, told Business Insider.

If possible, she recommends her clients combine sauna therapy with cold plunges, which can also increase the production of mood-enhancing neurotransmitters like norepinephrine. "I love partaking in both of these experiences because of the profound mental health benefits I experience."

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