

Steam room vs. sauna ^[1]

Dear Alice,

I am wondering what is the difference between a steam room and the sauna, is one better than the other? My gym has both and I am interested in trying them out.

— Confused

Answer

Dear Confused,

Saunas and steam rooms are heat rooms that people use for relaxation or to relieve some medical conditions like congestion or arthritis. But what *is* the difference between the two?

Saunas provide **dry** heat in a wood-paneled room from a wood or electric stove. Generally the stove heats rocks, which radiate heat throughout the room. A sauna may have small amount of steam if water is poured over the hot rocks, however a sauna overall provides dry heat. The temperature in a sauna typically ranges from 160 to 200 degrees Fahrenheit with a low level of humidity (ranging from 5 to 30 percent). Steam rooms provide **moist** heat from a water-filled generator pumping steam into the enclosed room. The temperature in a steam room typically ranges from 110 to 114 degrees Fahrenheit with a humidity level of 100 percent. Neither one is necessarily better than the other; so go ahead and try them both out and decide which one you prefer.

Benefits of heat baths (dry or moist air)

Sweating opens pores and can temporarily cleanse the outer skin, but sweating in saunas doesn't remove toxins ^[2] from within the body as some people believe. Also, scientific evidence doesn't support the widely-held belief that using saunas or steam rooms causes weight loss, which is a popular reason why many people use these facilities. Both do make you warmer, make you sweat and relax, lower your pulse and blood pressure by causing blood vessels to dilate, and remove salts from your system.

Cautions

There is a risk of dehydrating in the dry heat of a sauna, so be sure to drink plenty of water

before and after using a sauna. Try limiting your bathing time to 15 to 20 minutes the first few times using these rooms to get used to the experience. Also, beware that steam rooms provide ideal breeding conditions for various infection-producing microbes. For example, athletes' foot or other fungal infections can be better avoided if you wear a towel and shower shoes or flip flops in the steam room (and in the sauna, for that matter).

Finally, because of the extreme heat — especially in saunas — avoid using saunas or steam rooms if you are pregnant, have heart disease, high or very low blood pressure (or who are taking any medication that affects blood pressure), epilepsy, those taking antibiotics, or those using any type of mind-altering drug (like stimulants, tranquilizers, alcohol). As always, you can talk to your health care provider to make sure using a sauna or steam room is safe for you.

And when heat bathing don't forget to RELAX and ENJOY! Heat baths can be hard to come by as many people don't have space or money to build them in their homes, so you may want to take advantage of those facilities at your gym!

Alice!

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