

Hydrotherapy

Introduced to Britain by bathhouse-loving Romans, hydrotherapy is now recognised for its potential to promote wellbeing, reduce anxiety and alleviate chronic pain – and you don't even have to be able to swim to reap the rewards

What is it?

It's believed that the thermal properties of water assist healing. The body's reaction to hot and cold water causes the nerves at the surface of the skin to carry impulses deep into the body. This reaction is thought to lessen pain sensitivity, stimulate the immune system, aid lymphatic drainage and increase blood circulation. So, whether you're taking a long, languorous bath, standing under an icy-cold shower, or spending two hours in a saline floatation tank, you are in effect harnessing the healing power of water.

Is there any evidence?

In 1994, researchers in France published a study in the *Journal of Rheumatology* to assess the effect of hydrotherapy on chronic lower back pain. Over three weeks one group of sufferers was treated with medication, the other treated with both medication and hydrotherapy. Results showed that the patients receiving hydrotherapy showed significant improvement in flexibility and a noticeable reduction in pain intensity.

A US study in the late 90s confirmed these findings. The 40-person study carried out at the University of Minnesota showed that 85% of participants would chose a whirlpool bath over a still

one and that, while both baths reduced participants' anxiety levels, the whirlpool bath reduced participants' reactivity to stress.

Where does it come from?

The healing properties of water were recognised by the ancient Egyptians in 2000BC. The Romans were also strong believers in the power of hydrotherapy. The UK was slower off the mark, although historical research suggests that from as early as AD1138 people travelled from all over England to Bath to wash away infirmities.

The ancient tradition of bathing has gradually evolved into several modern treatments including the Jacuzzi, watsu (underwater shiatsu), flotation tanks, the Vichy shower and thalassotherapy, which involves immersion in seawater pools of different temperatures and degrees of salinity.

Who can do it?

Everybody can benefit from hydrotherapy, even those who can't swim (hydrotherapy treatments such as the Vichy shower and watsu do not require you to support yourself in water). Hydrotherapy particularly benefits those suffering from arthritis and back pain, and those who have had joint replacements. Insomniacs may also find hydrotherapy

beneficial, because water has a deeply soothing and relaxing effect on the body.

What results can I expect?

Immersion in warm water often has a satisfyingly soporific effect. Much like taking a hot bath, hydrotherapy is likely to leave you both physically and mentally relaxed. Hunger is also a common after-effect.

Floatation is generally the most invigorating of hydrotherapies. An hour-long float has been likened to having the same restorative effect as a four-hour sleep.

Contra-indications

Children, the elderly and anyone who is pregnant should avoid extremes of temperature because of the risk of fainting or shock. Discontinue treatment immediately if you experience light headedness, and rest for at least 20 minutes after any treatment to allow your blood pressure and body temperature to normalise.

Treatment may not be suitable for people suffering from: open wounds or skin infections, a stomach virus, severe breathing difficulties, incontinence or a raised temperature.

Hydrotherapy should never be undertaken if you are under the influence of alcohol.

How was it for you? Helen Ochyra (stressed and suspicious)

“ I consider myself a typical Londoner. I keep a cold-shouldered distance from other commuters, look suspiciously on anyone who approaches me in the street and tut when people stand too close on the tube, so I wasn't too enamoured with the idea of being cuddled and cradled by a stranger – in my swimming costume.

But then I entered the calming atmosphere of Bath spa and met hydrotherapist Martina. Warm and friendly, her demeanour was immediately soothing, much like

the water in the hot bath treatment pool we waded into.

Holding both my palms Martina told me to take a deep breath and close my eyes. I was desperate to relax, to be good at this, so I did as she said. Cradled in her arms, I began to be lulled into a deep state of relaxation. With my ears submerged, gurgling underwater sounds replaced real-world noise. Unfortunately, my mind was still alert and I battled to keep my eyes closed.

Watsu therapy combines massage, acupressure and stretches in a series of graceful, flowing movements.

Martina held me and twirled me in the water, my arms and legs trailed behind me and I could feel each of my muscles gradually lengthening and relaxing.

Having drifted into a deep trance, awake but soothed, I hardly realised when Martina stood me up at the edge of the pool. She drifted away and it took me some time to come round, realise it was over and open my eyes. Leaving the water, I was so relaxed I could barely speak and, for the rest of the day, nothing fazed me. Until I got back on the tube ...

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