

health



Super Soaker

FACTS: A HOT, RELAXING BATH HAS MIND-BLOWING SHORT- AND LONG-TERM BENEFITS THAT GO FAR BEYOND SELF-CARE. LET'S GET THE WATER RUNNING...

By Ashley Mateo

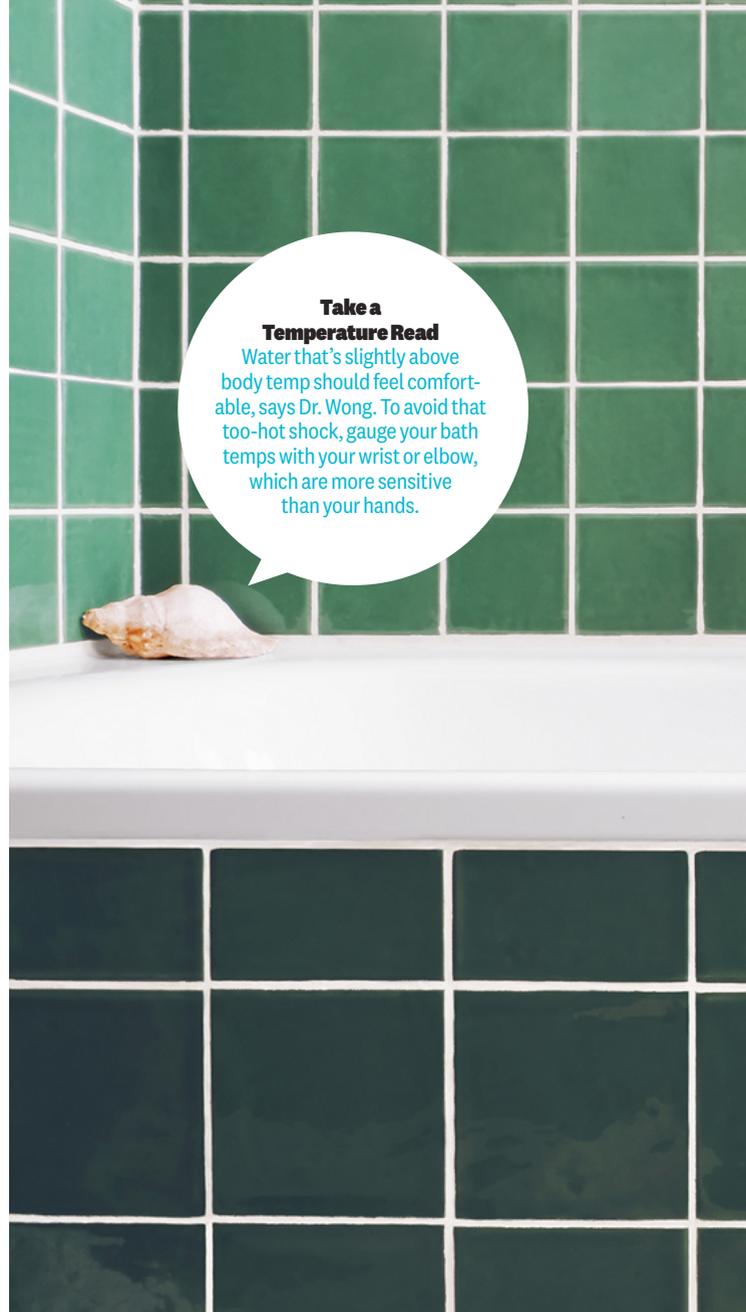




When I found myself apartment hunting last year, I had a list of nonnegotiables: natural light, a washer and dryer, and a shiny new soaking tub. Those 12 square feet of porcelain were crucial to me, because that's inevitably where I retreated after every long run during marathon training, in the middle of chaotic work days when I needed to unplug, and when I felt overwhelmed or just sad. Soaking in a long, hot bath is sometimes reduced to an indulgence or a quick self-care ritual, but to me, it's a downright necessity.

I'm far from the only one with strong feelings about suds. Pinterest reported a surge in traffic related to bathing in 2020 after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic: The number of people looking for deep soaking tubs increased 145 percent from 2019, while searches for even niche tub practices like "spiritual cleansing baths" jumped 180 percent.

Immersing yourself in hot water can actually act as a type of therapy. And there are real, science-backed physiological benefits. While some of the studies may be small and experts agree more research needs to be done (funny how studying hot baths doesn't seem to be a priority for scientists right now!), there are more than a few solid reasons to draw a bath tonight, from improving heart health to boosting performance in your next workout. Dive in.



Take a Temperature Read

Water that's slightly above body temp should feel comfortable, says Dr. Wong. To avoid that too-hot shock, gauge your bath temps with your wrist or elbow, which are more sensitive than your hands.



You'll Support Your Ticker

The more often people sit in a warm tub, the lower their risk for heart disease and stroke, found a new study in the journal *Heart*. In fact, a daily hot bath was associated with a 28 percent and a 26 percent lower risk for those cardiovascular issues, respectively. That's because the heat of the water expands your blood vessels and arteries (known as *vasodilation*—a little biology refresher here) and decreases damage to the layer of cells

that line the inside of the blood vessels, says cardiologist Jennifer Wong, MD, medical director of non-invasive cardiology at MemorialCare Heart & Vascular Institute at Orange Coast Medical Center.

The dilation effect lowers blood pressure and powers up blood flow throughout the body, which is thought to reduce stress. This process may also help prevent the buildup of fats, cholesterol, and other substances in and on the artery walls, says Dr. Wong. It's *almost* as if bathing should be prescribed as part of a heart-healthy program, no?



DO NOT DISTURB

Four accessories to make your newfound health treatment a li'l more indulgent



Take It Easy Bath Pillow

Kick back comfortably (and nix neck pain) with this inflatable rainbow cushion that suctions to your tub wall so it won't slip out of place.

\$15, bando.com



JBL Go 3

Play your favorite relaxing tunes or stream a low-key podcast to unwind without stressing about your smartphone taking the dip along with you.

\$40, jbl.com



Naturopathica Sweet Birch Magnesium Bath Flakes

This jar is full of pink magnesium pebbles that target sore muscles and stiff joints. \$42 for 11 oz, naturopathica.com



Ouai Chill Pills

The name nails it. Toss a jasmine-and-rose-scented bath bomb or two into the water and enter zen mode. They're also great for soothing chapped skin.

\$30, theouai.com

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You can soothe soreness faster in H₂O.
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▼ ▼ You'll Power Your Fitness Performance

Nope, not suggesting you swap your sweat for a soak! But dipping after a workout can increase your gains. Bathing three times a week for 30 minutes in 102-degree water led to improvements in endurance exercise, per a recent study in the *International Journal of Research in Exercise Physiology*.

Heat stress (which occurs when you immerse your body up to your neck in hot water) jacks up your blood plasma volume,

increases the concentration of nitric oxide, and kick-starts the production of heat-shock proteins (good guys that help scavenge free radicals internally), says study author Lance Dalleck, PhD, an exercise and sport-science professor at the High Altitude Performance Lab at Western Colorado University. As a result, "you're going to get more blood to your heart and working muscles, which signals an improved capacity for endurance performance," he says. "That translates to a lower heart rate for the same workload, which makes it possible to exercise for longer periods." Wow!

▼ ▼ You'll Drift Off to Dreamland

At least 30 percent of Americans suffer from insomnia, struggling to fall asleep or stay asleep, according to the American Academy of Sleep Medicine (the number is even heftier in these pandemic times). Bathing one to two hours before bed in 104- to 109-degree water helped knock people out an average of 10 minutes quicker than normal and led to better sleep quality, a recent analysis found. "Sleep occurs when the

core temperature drops in a normal circadian rhythm," says sleep psychologist Katherine Hall, a therapist with the online insomnia treatment program Somnus Therapy. "When the blood vessels in your skin open up while soaking, excess heat comes to the surface of your body," Hall says. "As you get out of the bath, that heat energy dissipates into the environment, signaling the circadian rhythm to slow down your heart and breathing rates and priming you for optimal sleep." (FYI: That temperature drop typically occurs naturally about two hours before bedtime, but a bath can get the process going.)



You'll Turn Your Mood Around

You probably don't need a scientific paper to tell you a hot soak can make you feel better. But you likely didn't know a daily bath can be twice as effective as exercise in treating depression, revealed a new study in *BMC Psychiatry*. Sitting in a 104-degree bath for 15 to 20 minutes twice a week led to significant improvements in depression severity after just two weeks—it's a safe, effective add-on to other mental health interventions. That feelings boost might stem from the fact that steeping yourself like a tea bag is oh-so-soothing. The positive change that a hot-water dip has on blood pressure also offers relaxation benefits, says Dr. Wong. Whatever the reason, we're here for it.



You'll Boost Blood Sugar Regulation

Glucose (or blood sugar) is your body's preferred source of fuel; when your levels are out of whack, you may experience issues with fatigue and weight. A pre-meal bath was found to lower peak glucose concentrations, research in the journal *Temperature* found. Meaning, a soak before dinner may help your body better regulate blood sugar levels when you eat. The research around heat and glucose is still in early stages, says Casey Means, MD, chief medical officer and cofounder of the metabolic-health company Levels. But a warm bath prior to din (plus other healthy lifestyle behaviors) certainly doesn't hurt, she says.

The Ritual That Changed Everything

"I started using hot baths during my collegiate track-and-field career, when I had access to the soak tubs in our training facility. Now I've been doing them at home in my regular tub for more than a decade. Baths help me maximize my training: When I don't take one as part of my recovery protocol, my soreness lingers 24 to 48 hours, compared with 12 to 15 hours post-bath. I track my heart rate, too, and I see improvements after a soak; my resting HR drops one to three beats per minute the next morning, which tells me I'll be able to train at a higher intensity or under greater loads. Plus, I log more time in deep sleep on days I bathe."

—SARAH RAY, 35, SEATTLE, NATIONAL CROSSFIT AND WEIGHT-LIFTING COMPETITOR



No Tub? No Problem

Honest talk: A shower isn't *quite* as immersive as a bath...but that hot spray still has benefits. Both water activities showed health upsides—like promoting sleep and relieving depression—in a recent scientific review, although baths led to larger improvements. Sitting in a sauna (another type of whole-body heating) has the same performance-boosting and sleep-inducing benefits as a bath. Can't build one in a closet Finnish-style or seal your bathroom to build up steam? Many gyms and physical therapy offices have infrared and regular saunas that'll do the trick.