

Sauna — preferably infrared — is one of your daily physical modality options on the CleanUP. As naturopathic doctors, we're familiar with the benefits of physical agents in healing: one of our core therapies is constitutional hydrotherapy, using the healing effects of temperature and water. Heat applied through a sauna is an extension of that, with a long tradition behind it — Scandinavian saunas, European hot-spring spas, and the sweat lodge of North American indigenous peoples.

Why Infrared Instead of Traditional

There's mounting research on saunas promoting depuration — the removal of toxic agents like solvents, pesticides, and toxic metals from the body. The problem with traditional saunas is the temperature required for benefit is very high, often 180–220°F or more, and many people can't bear it — especially those with cardiovascular or respiratory problems, or anyone already in a weakened state.

Infrared saunas promote sweating and depuration at a much lower, more tolerable temperature — roughly 110–140°F. "Infrared" is simply a portion of the electromagnetic spectrum, on the long-wavelength side of visible light. Conventional saunas heat the air first, and the air heats your skin. With infrared, it's estimated that less than 20% of the heat goes into the air, leaving 80% to heat the body directly. The rays penetrate deeper, so besides excreting chemicals through the skin, infrared saunas more effectively mobilize chemicals out of the other organs of elimination. Because sweating happens at lower temperatures, people spend more time in the sauna and release more toxins — even patients with cardiovascular illness have been shown to tolerate and benefit from infrared saunas.

What the Research Supports

- Stage II and III congestive heart failure: decreased medications, reduced systolic blood pressure, reduced blood glucose, improved vascular endothelial function
- Improved heart rate variability; hypertension
- Rheumatoid arthritis and ankylosing spondylitis: decreased pain, stiffness, and fatigue
- Scleroderma, psoriasis, sporotrichosis, anorexia nervosa, cancer support, wound healing, leukocyte potentiation, mercury depuration
- The most common uses in naturopathic practice: detoxification (fibromyalgia, chronic fatigue, mercury toxicity) and pain management

How It's Used

Most infrared protocols mimic standard sauna protocols — some rotate between cold showers and sauna sessions, or integrate other supports. Keep the temperature and duration lower for the first few sessions and raise them gradually according to your tolerance. Many people feel better after the first treatment; some take ten or more sessions before noticing a substantial change. Because sweating loses more than water, replace electrolytes and consider trace minerals (magnesium, calcium, zinc, iron). Preventively, a common recommendation is ten 30-minute sessions over two to three weeks, twice a year.

What Practitioners Have Observed

- A regulatory effect on sleep, moods, and energy when used for detoxification, both therapeutic and preventive
- Significant changes in toxicity indicators and platelet and red blood cell aggregation on pre- and post-session live cell analyses
- Good results in chronic low back pain when combined with constitutional hydrotherapy
- Substantial improvement of chronic pain from decade-old injuries; useful as an adjunct to weight management
- Helpful for chronic skin conditions, chronic fatigue, and cardiovascular conditioning
- Improved skin tone and elasticity with regular use
- A patient with fibromyalgia had significant pain reduction after eight 30-minute sessions

Contraindications

Do not use an infrared sauna if any of these apply — and when in doubt, ask us first:

- Pregnancy or lactation
- Medications with a narrow therapeutic index
- Fear of small spaces
- Prone to heat illnesses
- Extreme adrenal suppression and hypotension
- Hemophilia
- Metallic implants
- Unstable hypertension
- Lupus or multiple sclerosis

Also use caution with a history of addiction: chemicals stored in tissues can be released during detoxification and trigger past effects of chemical exposure.

Overall, the infrared sauna is an effective way to promote the removal of toxins from the body and support circulation and healing — one of the most useful physical tools in a comprehensive detoxification program like the CleanUP.

Adapted from "Infrared Sauna in Naturopathic Practice" by Rahim B. Habib, BSc, ND.