

Mindful Sauna Practice Alleviates Allergic Symptoms

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ABSTRACT

Allergies, asthma, and skin diseases follow us to the sauna and influence how we bathe. Based on this new study, sauna also has an effect on these conditions. Saunologia conducted an electronic pilot survey (N=84) in the Fall 2021. It was discovered that many Finns receive relieve to their conditions from sauna, but under some circumstances sauna can also provoke new symptoms and make one feel worse. Based on the initial results, positive effects seem to prevail over negative ones as about half of the respondents enjoyed the sauna because of the health benefits. Several informants had bad experiences from sauna. Based on their reports, many undesired experiences could be avoided by paying attention to sauna conditions and the proceedings such as the technical functionality, moderate temperature, and quality of water. This pilot motivates further research into the topic and emphasizes the need to focus on select conditions as asthma, atopic skin, and allergies each seem to have different response to and requirements for sauna.

BACKGROUND AND GOALS

Finnish sauna bathing is an ages old tradition of heating one's body in hot and humid air of a special sauna room. The health benefits of Finnish sauna bathing have recently been discovered and corroborated through multiple epidemiological studies [1]. It's also known that although Finnish people are active bathers, few can achieve the full benefits and some Finns never enjoy sauna [2]. From anecdotal evidence, we presume that in addition to health and social reasons to avoid sauna, sauna use may be affected by the negative sauna experiences.

This study examines how people with allergies, asthma and skin diseases (here collectively dubbed as AAS-cluster of conditions) experience sauna. These ailments have some common characteristics with autoimmune disease, although they are not usually considered as such.

In Finland, no special medial recommendations for sauna bathing exist for the AAS-cluster people. For instance, current care guidelines for asthma never mention sauna despite the fact that many Finnish medical practitioners have publicly defended sauna bathing for its specific benefits to these conditions.

This study was designed in collaboration with the Finnish

patient organization for AAS-cluster, Allergy, Skin and Asthma Federation. The goal was to explore how people affected by these conditions experience sauna bathing, in good and bad. We aimed at extracting qualitative information about the nature of experiences as well as the underlying mechanisms.

METHODS AND INFORMANTS

During October and November 2021, Saunologia made available over the Internet an electronic survey distributed using Google Forms. Participation was voluntary but it was encouraged with an opportunity to attend a raffle of sauna related products. The survey was advertised by several sauna related organizations as well as the Federation. The study was open for three weeks. The data analysis was carried on Microsoft Excel. The study required informed consent and informed the participants about the aims of study and data protection policy as required by European General Data Protection Regulations.

The pilot study received 84 responses in the given time. The majority of respondents were female (77%), average age being 50, ranging from 28 to 76 years. Most of the respondents (86%) identified with the AAS-cluster.

RESULTS

The most common ailments reported were pollen allergy (56%), atopic dermatitis (42%), food allergies (41%), and asthma (38%). It was usual for one person to have more than one ailment, median was two conditions. Almost everyone had a clinical diagnosis (90%). Respondents experienced symptoms continuously (15%) or repeatedly (31%).

On average, the respondents enjoyed a sauna bath two to three times a week (33%), but almost equally many people did this once a week (28%). Average time spent in sauna was 21 minutes, the figure is skewed because some people reported durations of over an hour.

More than a quarter of respondents (27%) informed that because of some AAS-cluster issue they avoid going to sauna. On the other hand, 48% of respondents said they attend to sauna to improve some their AAS-cluster issues. Almost a half (46%) reported receiving some relief to their conditions.

PERCEIVED BENEFITS FROM SAUNA

Several informants provided open ended comments about their perceived benefits. Most of these (N=33) related to easier breathing, nasal decongestion, and respiratory mucosa relief. People with asthma and pollen allergies reported these benefits.

Fewer people (N=16) reported about improved skin condition after sauna. These comments were from people with atopic dermatitis. They usually described how skin is easier to clean and later on treat with skin cream after sauna. Informants had some routine solutions for skin care during and after sauna. Using only specific shampoo and soap (N=40) and regular application of skin cream after sauna (N=38) were most common.

Some people also noted the benefits of sauna for mental wellbeing and stress relief, which they believed to indirectly help their other conditions.

PERCEIVED NEGATIVE EFFECTS

Going to sauna had caused several respondents some response that they considered an allergic reaction (N=29). Several people had experienced these more than once (N=18).

The typical symptoms associated with negative experiences were associated with respiratory tract (N=15), eyes (N=12), skin (N=11), or rash (N=10). Eye and respiratory feelings often co-occurred, as well as skin and rash feelings. More than half of the people with symptoms (N=18) had resorted to some medical help to relieve their conditions. Nine people of all (11%) the effect was severe enough to disrupt the sauna bathing altogether.

Most of the respondents identified a reason for their symptoms (62%). Several people mentioned so called “löyly” scents, steam scents, or water fragrances which in the Finnish sauna tradition are mixed with water that is frequently vaporized into sauna room air during sauna bathing. This allows the chemical substance, sometimes possibly in an altered form due to the violent process of vaporizing from hot heater surface, to enter breathing air, lungs, eyes, and naturally naked skin. Other explanations were not mentioned repeatedly. For instance, only a few people noted that there are certain unfavorable sauna conditions, such as too hot or dry air, which worsened their experiences.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

This pilot study provided results supporting the positive effects of Finnish sauna bathing to the selfcare of allergies, asthma and skin diseases. It also revealed some cases of how people with AAS-cluster conditions may experience adverse effects from sauna.

These results are preliminary and subject to several disclaimers. It is obvious that the respondents don't represent the general population but a very selective proportion of people. The bias is here towards middle-aged women and naturally people with AAS-cluster issues. In comparison to data from general population from the previous year (Liikkanen & Laukkanen, 2020), the respondents were also slightly more frequent sauna goes than their peer age groups. This means the study has clear a selection bias. On the other hand, it was not designed to be nationally representative. However, the selection may have biased the findings to the positive side as people with positive experiences may have been more eager to participate. The opposite is not likely the case.

Despite its shortcomings, the pilot study provides motivation for further research. The study should be extended to larger sample based on the current design. Another interesting line of research would be experimental trial on the real effects of sauna on any of the AAS-cluster conditions.

A major challenge for research is to define a population to be sampled. Based on the findings from the current study, it seems better to focus on one of the three conditions at a time as they show quite different strategies and responses to sauna. This may become problem the more rare the diseases happens to be. However, the relatively high prevalence of sauna bathing in Finland would make such study possible. Through more robust evidence, we might find applicable and tested solutions for current care guidelines published by the national health case officials. Swedish medical professor Hägglund [3] has argued for sauna to be included in

prescriptions treatments. Indeed, the current study implies this could be justified suggestion also in the case of asthma, allergies, or skin disease.

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