



The Benefits of a Long Hot Soak

(Medical and Otherwise)

By Roberta Jordan

When I was six, I loved to soak in a huge old bathtub for hours, especially in the dead of winter. Then, only under duress, I would emerge, leaving my yellow duckie to bob about while I sank into slumber. What happened to one of the best rituals of life? One of life's little pleasures, delicious and almost free, a ritual full of things I so need in my stress filled adult life.

Back then, I soaked in a tub because it left me feeling wonderful. I knew nothing of the Japanese passion for soaking, or that the ancient Greek physician Hippocrates promoted the healthful effects of bathing, or the German's Nineteenth Century studies into the benefits of hydrotherapy, or that this universal fad would finally start to catch on here in my own country, long before I made my self-discovery.

No one knows for sure just how profound the health benefits of hydrotherapy are (also known as *balneotherapy*), probably because the cultures who indulge the most are the least concerned with the science of the act and focused instead on the ritual and simple trust of knowing how good they feel during and after the pleasures of a long hot soak.

Western culture asks for proof of the benefits ("Show me"), and to this end, let's look at some of the data that documents what the Greeks, Romans, and Japanese have known for a thousand plus years, that soaking offers a feeling of physical well-being, relieves the pain of physical wounds or aching muscles, calms the mind, and nourishes the spirit... that the spirit of soaking transcends the act of getting clean.

A look at the data through randomized single and double blind controlled studies from around the world documents medical improvements in patients with low back pain, spasticity, improved range of motion, benefits for ventilated patients, psychological and emotional improvements, improvements with varicose veins, quality of life improvements, and a cadre of other physical gains and self reported psychological benefits.

Studies ranging in size from thirty to two thousand five hundred subjects document the benefits of hydrotherapy and suggest that it is a valuable adjunct to other forms of physical and drug treatments. Some studies even note a reduction in the need for other therapies. The addition of hydrotherapy to a rehabilitation program is repeatedly shown to be advantageous. Studies also document that mineral water, used instead of tap water, can heighten the longevity of beneficial effects. These studies document what has been known or assumed since humans began the ritual of plopping into geothermal springs only to discover relief of some sort. That said, we are not all living with the luxury of volcanic (or geothermal) springs at our back door, but we can enjoy various other types of spas.

Hydrotherapy (or balenotherapy) is the use of water in various states and temperatures to maintain health and promote healing. Steam, ice, hot, tepid, and cold water are all used in a number of ways alone or as part of a therapeutic regimen. For example, ice is applied to a sprained ankle or sore muscles are soothed by soaking in a hot tub. Most forms of hydrotherapy have become accepted remedies. Many are universally prescribed by both conventional and alternative health practitioners.

The basic properties of water allow this nontoxic and readily available substance to be used in numerous ways. Hydrotherapy takes advantage of water's unique ability to store and transmit both cold and heat. Cold has a "depressant" affect, decreasing normal activity, constricting blood vessels, numbing nerves, and slowing respiration. Heat-based hydrotherapies, such as hot tubs, have the opposite effect. As the body attempts to throw off excess heat and keep the body temperature from rising, dilation of blood vessels occurs, providing increased circulation.

Contrast therapies, such as immersing in hot and then cold water, are used to dramatically stimulate circulation. For example, a thirty minute contrast bath beginning with soaking for four minutes in a hot tub and then dropping into a cold plunge for one minute, repeated for a total of thirty minutes, can produce a 95 percent increase in blood flow. If you are looking for a natural high, this may be it!

Water-based therapies in spas are currently used throughout conventional, complementary, and alterative medicine. Hydrotherapy itself is used by almost all physical therapy centers. Numerous techniques using water are considered standard methods of treatment for rehabilitation and pain relief, including exercise in hydrotherapy pools, whirlpool baths, and swimming pools. These standard techniques are now being combined with treatments such as Watsu (water Shiatsu, a massage while being held in the water). Clinical benefits aside, westerners are catching onto the secret that the ritual of a long luxurious bath or soak offers a multitude of special pleasures.

Instead of racing to the shower to get clean to go out for the night, the shower can be a prelude to an evening soak. Another distinction between Eastern and Western bathing rituals: in the Japanese culture, one would never enter a tub dirty. Their idea is to get clean, then soak the soul. Westerners regretfully soak in their wash water (making us want to get in and out), which fact might explain why we see bathing as a means to an end. But once we adapt to the separateness of the two experiences, washing versus soaking, both seem more enticing. The West may never convert to the ritual of sitting down on a stool to scrub prior to soaking, but we might accept the separation of the two acts.

So treat yourself and your loved ones to the time-revered pleasure of a hot tub soak. Your body and your soul won't regret it!

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