

HEAL HOT TUBS

BEFORE TOUTING MEDICAL BENEFITS TO CUSTOMERS,
KNOW THE FACTS

BY JIM RAPOSA

Mankind (and the spa industry) has long sold the health benefits of regular hot tub use. It seems almost every known health dilemma has been met with an anecdotal hot tub remedy. No wonder it's so easy for customers to become cynical about these claims.

THEY

Even the most educated consumer can grow suspicious when we assert that a hot tub begets more restful sleep; relieves chronic pain and discomfort associated with diabetes, arthritis and circulatory issues; reduces stress; improves heart health; decreases issues associated with lupus and, of course, claims of increased mobility. That's quite a list! No wonder we can, for a moment, look a bit Barnum-esque to customers. We need third-party legitimacy. Proof.

Dr. Tom Lachocki, CEO of the National Swimming Pool Foundation, stresses that hot tub retailers and manufacturers need science-based proof of such claims. "This information is compelling for the customer, because they can say 'Ah, now I see there are specific health benefits and not just a salesperson telling me this,'" Lachocki says. "Just saying all this isn't enough for educated consumers."

While some health-benefit claims remain anecdotal, many have been proven accurate — and overwhelmingly beneficial.

Dr. Bruce Becker, director of the National Aquatic & Sports Medicine Institute at Washington State University, has collected his conclusions in the online flipbook, *Hot Water & Healthy Living*, from NSPF. Becker says there are a number of positive health results from hot tub use.

"Immersion in warm or neutral water," Becker says, "tends to decrease blood pressure and decrease the workload of the heart...by dilating blood vessels and reducing peripheral vascular resistance. By decreasing that resistance, it makes less

work for the heart in circulating blood."

Becker says warm-water immersion can also simultaneously permit circulation to tissues that are in the process of recovery or that need increased oxygen flow. This can increase blood flow inside the brain, too. It's a relatively new finding, he says, which helps explain hot tub benefits on mental acuity, improved cognitive function and recent claims of benefits for Alzheimer's patients. Early studies indicate dementia patients function better — at least for a short period — after getting out of the water. "Whether those effects are long-term isn't yet known," Becker says, "but things happen to the central nervous system which create the overall effect of relaxation," which is the key for numerous health benefits, he says.

Becker's studies indicate regular hot tub use assists in the removal of, or radically diminishes, the stress trigger in our central nervous system. When this occurs, the speed at which your brain processes information increases along with brain connectivity, integrating functions

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motherboard, he says, which regulates physiologic processes that happen at a subconscious level. “This includes regulation of heart rate, respiratory rate and digestion,” he says. “Almost everything that happens in your body without you thinking about it.”

Becker says the sympathetic system generates a stress response — a fight-or-flight reaction — that increases your heart rate, blood pressure and breathing rate. Early studies of war veterans indicate that many post-traumatic stress disorder sufferers used hot tubs. Preliminary findings indicate PTSD sufferers are calmer and exhibit fewer hair-trigger responses after hot tub therapy.

Becker says this is because warm water dominates our parasympathetic nervous system. “Consequently, exposure to warm water usually drops the heart rate, blood pressure, and potentially increases the kind of mental activity we commonly experience while being in

across both sides of the brain. This can lead to potential improvement of creativity and memory.

It is famously alleged, for example, that Sir Winston Churchill dictated speeches, book manuscripts and correspondence to his secretary while he sat in a tub of warm water. Becker says he’s often speculated to what degree this, if at all, aided Churchill’s mental perception while facilitating the prime minister’s role in history.

We know hot tubs have a multitude of health benefits, but how do you carry the effects of stress reduction with you out of the water? Becker says the work in his lab focused on the relationship between the sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous systems, which comprise the autonomic nervous system. This is essentially the

a relaxed state,” he says.

Alice Cunningham, co-owner of Olympic Hot Tub in Seattle, still marvels at the positive effects hot tubs have on her customers. “A police officer who’d been injured in the line of duty came into the store,” Cunningham says. “His injury forced him to move his entire body in order to move his head. After undergoing therapy, he came in and bought a spa. Two weeks later, he came back in and was able to move his head normally. It moved each of us in the store to tears; it was just amazing.”

For Sherry La Barre of PDC Spa World in Lehigh, Pa., the hot tub as therapeutic aid hits close to home. “Long before I entered the business, my husband and I purchased a hot tub because he hurt his back,” La Barre says. “I can testify that for someone with back stiffness — who gets in the hot tub first thing in the morning — will notice relief. They’ll also function better the rest of the day.”

For some conditions, the jury’s still out on whether hot tub therapy works. Doctors have differing opinions on whether heart patients should use a hot tub. Becker says there are qualifiers for use, notably water temperature. Hotter water can increase heart rate in extreme cases of heart disease. So any hot tub use or aquatic therapy needs to be discussed with a doctor.

For those with Type 2 Diabetes, early studies with hot tubs point to beneficial effects on blood glucose levels. As one of the estimated 29 million diabetics in America, this caught my attention. Advanced studies are necessary, yet early findings reported in the *New England Journal of Medicine* showed that a therapy group of Type 2s studied over 14 years showed reduced blood sugar, weight loss and improved sleep patterns. More studies are required to understand why warm water benefits people with Type 2 Diabetes. The potential for hot tub

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treatment of this disease is exciting. Unfortunately, Becker says, there is no known research on Type 1s.

Lauren Stack, mission development director for NSPF, says the organization did studies in 2008 and 2012 that identified three motivating factors consumers reflect on when deciding to buy a hot tub: health, connection — time bonding with family and friends — and escape. “Consumers are mostly buying hot tubs for the health benefits,” Stack says. “The connection category is significant for families coming together; the recession has made time with family and friends more important. This really resonates with people.”

Lower on the priority list is escape. The concept that 20 to 30 minutes in warm water equates to a Bahaman vacation, for example, is pure marketing propaganda. In a sense, a hot tub purchase is indicative of properly defined priorities. Better health, and time with family and friends is where hot tubs offer

a legitimate promise to a buyer.

While lots of the hot tub industry’s health claims have been proven as fact, Becker says there are many more miles to travel, lamenting the absence of funding to continue mapping the benefits of warm-water immersion on health and the treatment of ailments. “In my lab, we did a lot of work on projects funded with \$250,000 or less,” he explains. “The money has mostly dried up.” Perhaps it is in the best interest to pour a few dollars into the research indicating a hot tub is much more than a luxury item. It’s an idea whose time has come. ■

DIABETES HOT TUB RESEARCH:

diabeteshealth.com/miscellaneous/hot-tub-therapy-for-people-with-diabetes/



HOT WATER & HEALTHY LIVING:

nspf.org/Documents/HWHL_Flipbook2/index.html

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