



# Water works

*Are you a water baby? Do you love long showers, soothing swims, blissful baths?  
Hydrotherapy may be the healing stream to wash away your woes.*

Words CAROLINE ROBERTSON

**A**n elderly gent takes a daily dip at my local beach rain or shine. He hobbles down the soft sand and wades into the waves. As he resurfaces from the salty baptism he beams a boyish grin. Striding out as if emerging from the fountain of youth, he massages his limbs under an invigorating cold shower.

JH Kellogg, founder of Battle Creek Sanitarium in 1866, would approve. Kellogg wrote in *Rational Hydrotherapy* that a cold shower "is one of the most powerful of all tonics. It creates an appetite for food and a disposition to and capacity for both mental and muscular activity to a remarkable degree."

Beach benefits abound. The sand exfoliates feet and tones muscles. The blue space effect calms, cools, lowers blood pressure and aids sleep. Mineral-rich seawater combined with moderate sun increases immunity, purifies and relaxes. The healing sea is specifically soothing for depression, psoriasis, dandruff, dermatitis and eczema. Sea air's rich negative ions boost oxygenation, neutralise free radicals, reduce bacteria and increase immunity.

A tonic trip to the ocean has been prescribed since Dr Jacques de la Bonnardière coined the term "thalassotherapy" for coastal cures in the 1860s. Health seekers have flocked to the Black Sea, Baltic, Brittany and the Mediterranean for millennia. In many fashionable circles, spa cures became an annual must for mineral or hot spring hydrotherapy. When writer Mark Twain relieved his rheumatism at France's thermal spa town Aix-les-Bains in 1891, he raved it was "so enjoyable that if I hadn't had a disease I would have borrowed one just to have a pretext for going".

Hydrotherapy includes an ocean of water treatments. Also known as aquatherapy or hydrophathy, they involve internal and external modalities. Water is of varying depth, pressure, temperature and type. Douching, steam inhalation, enemas and colonics are included in internal hydrotherapy. External hydrotherapy encompasses exercise hydrotherapy, aquatic physiotherapy, aquatic massage, watsu, immersion baths, cryotherapy, steam, saunas, jacuzzis, float tanks, sitz baths, vichy showers, scotch hoses and hot and cold packs.

Historically, all cultures have hydrotherapy rituals. Scandinavians alternate hot saunas with cold swims. Japanese have splashed in hot springs or *onsens* for centuries. Egyptian and Indian royalty bathed in essential oils and flowers. Romans shared communal springs. Hippocrates prescribed soaking in spring water for sickness along with massage: "The way to health is to have an aromatic bath and a scented massage every day." Sign me up!

Bavarian priest Sebastian Kneipp popularised the Kneipp system of hydrotherapy in Europe, combining water therapies with herbs, diet, exercise and spiritual practices. Today, you can benefit from home hydrotherapy or dip your toe into the sea of therapies available through spas, retreats and medical facilities.

## Liquid relief

Anyone who enjoys water laps up hydrotherapy. Water wellness programs purify, stimulate and soothe, depending on the regimen. Water's unique properties make it a miraculous medium for wellbeing. Aspects that account for the water therapy effect include anti-gravity, buoyancy, hydrostatic pressure, temperature, modality and water quality.

- Weightlessness in water is an anti-gravity gift to those experiencing pain, pregnancy, obesity, misalignment, weakness and poor co-ordination.
- Buoyancy makes movement much easier in water than on the ground. It allows free-flowing movement for those limited on land, such as people recovering from surgery or injury. Water radically reduces weight on a recuperating area, thus making it a safe medium to explore movement. Hydrostatic pressure provides an even compressive force that minimises swelling and supports exercise. Dense water also provides greater resistance to tone and strengthen while encouraging stability.
- Temperature can be icy-cold or steamy-hot in hydrotherapy. Alternating hot and cold increases stimulation, immunity and cleansing of the lymphatic system. This "contrast hydrotherapy" helps in acute stages of injury by stimulating blood flow and reducing swelling.

Soaking in a hot tub after a cold day is delicious. Warm water melts muscle tension, increases range of movement,

stimulates circulation, reduces swelling, soothes stress, eases pain, calms nerve sensitivity, decongests the respiratory tract, purifies pores and promotes sleep.

The most medically recognised form of hydrotherapy is practitioner-assisted sessions in a special pool heated at 33–36°C. Treatment may be solo with a physiotherapist, watsu practitioner, aqua-aerobics instructor or exercise physiologist.

For centuries, cold water has been advocated by naturopaths and yogis for longevity and immunity. Take the ice bucket challenge and you'll quickly feel the thrill of a chill. Cold water, ice or cryotherapy stimulates the immune system, increases alertness, stimulates endorphins, boosts circulation, accelerates metabolism, tightens skin, reduces hair loss, speeds recovery time and increases athletic performance.

As the outer skin layer temperature is lowered, capillaries and blood vessels undergo vasoconstriction, immediately followed by vasodilation. This causes the body to release toxins and feel-good hormones. The body tries to regenerate heat after a cold shower, raising the metabolic rate and activating the immune system, which produces more white blood cells.

Research by Russian doctor Sergei Bubnovkiy showed that soaking one's legs in icy water for 15 minutes a day improved immunity. Britain's Thrombosis Research Institute discovered that people who take cold showers every day improved their number of white cells in the body. Renowned guru Yogi Bhaan explained why yoga advocates cold showers: "When you take a cold shower your blood rushes out to meet the challenge. Capillaries open up and all the deposits have to go. It is a very cleansing process. Everywhere that the cold water hits, the blood will come. Everywhere you massage, rebuilding will occur and each cell of the body will be reconstructed."

No wonder it's the latest LA craze. Cryotherapy uses a gaseous form of nitrogen to lower skin surface temperature by 1–10°C during a two- to three-minute session. The exposed skin reacts to the extreme temperatures by sending messages to the brain that stimulate regulatory functions of the body. The skin's exposure to subzero temperatures is said to trigger the release



Photography Getty Images



## health

### HYDROTHERAPY

of anti-inflammatory molecules, endorphins and toxins and increase oxygen circulation.

Special water can be a medicinal elixir. While soaking in the sea, ozone water, magnesium water or spring water, you absorb substances like a sponge. Seawater has trace minerals of magnesium, potassium, calcium, sodium and iodine. These help to pull out impurities, relax muscles, soothe skin, boost immunity, ease arthritis, balance the thyroid, cleanse hair and clear the respiratory tract.

Most spring waters contain bicarbonate, sodium, calcium and magnesium to ease musculoskeletal aches. Hot springs often contain sulphur, which soothes skin conditions such as rosacea, eczema and dermatitis. Ozone water is used in Sydney's Olympic pools including the main Olympic pool at Homebush Stadium.

Ozone is soft water that's great for the skin and respiratory tract. It's used topically as a healing and antibacterial/antifungal agent on burns, scrapes and bruises, and in dentistry and surgery. Ozone water is free from chloramines, airborne endotoxins, bacteria, viruses, protozoa, spores, yeasts and fungi.

Application methods for hydrotherapy are bottomless. Forget water torture, pleasurable water pressure can be applied through many means including Switzerland's Vichy shower, California's hot tubs and Europe's Scottish showers where high-pressure hoses provide a blasting massage from a distance. Water pressure not only controls riots but it also stimulates the circulation, settles nerves, promotes purification and massages muscle tension.

In a sitz bath, one sits in water around belly-high for haemorrhoids, menstrual cramps, prostate swelling, thrush and genitourinary conditions. Hot steam treatments open up pores to detoxify and absorb herbal treatments. Colonic hydrotherapy is an option to consider for constipation, IBS, indigestion and post-chemotherapy.

### Test the waters

Water offers a world of relief and rehabilitation. Hydrotherapy is often prescribed as part of a program for prevention, peak performance or recovery. Pregnant women find water exercise eases back pain, promotes good posture and prepares the body for labour. They may even choose a water birth. Athletes turn to water for rapid recovery. Elderly people enjoy hydrotherapy as a safe way to stay fit without the risk of falling.

Richard Sibley, musculoskeletal physiotherapist at Kingsway Medical Centre in Western Australia, uses hydrotherapy to help his clients recover from surgery or injury. "It allows people with restricted weight-bearing ability to exercise earlier in their recovery, particularly after joint

replacement surgery, ligament and tendon repair surgery and spinal surgery. It aids pain levels, mobility and function in inflammatory conditions, including rheumatoid arthritis and fibromyalgia. Those with poor mobility, injury, poor balance, periods of inactivity and lack of confidence can perform exercises they would be unable to on land."

A patient of Sibley's testifies to the healing waters: "Hydrotherapy is my aquatic saviour. I've kept this as part of my rehabilitation as I've gotten stronger every session."

Hydrotherapy is liberating for those with involuntary muscle movement conditions such as cerebral palsy, muscular dystrophy, multiple sclerosis and Parkinson's disease, as the water slows while supporting spontaneous movement and relaxes the participant. Hydrotherapy also helps to maintain muscle mass and flexibility in a safe zone. Exercises are more attainable in warm water for those suffering arthritis as they feel less pain and more flexibility in the supportive aqua environment.

Mt Wilga Private Rehabilitation Hospital in New South Wales has two hydrotherapy pools to assist patients with a wide range of conditions, including amputation, pain management, brain/spinal cord injury or tumour, cancers, fractures, joint surgery, Parkinson's disease, reconditioning post surgery or illness, stroke, rheumatic pain, arthritis, poor muscle tone, poor circulation, muscle pain, headaches, joint replacement and connective tissue injuries.

### Hydrotherapy hazards

Hydrotherapy is safe in most circumstances, but seek medical advice if you have any of the following conditions: asthma, heart disease, skin infection, epilepsy, diabetes, incontinence, fever, high or low blood pressure, kidney failure, chlorine allergy or pregnancy. Before a session it's recommended not to eat a large meal or drink alcohol.

It's important to drink plenty of pure water after hydrotherapy as it's easy to underestimate the quantity of perspiration lost. Resting after a session integrates the healing effect and promotes rapid recovery from strain. Wash off chlorine water thoroughly and moisturise your body with natural oil such as hempseed oil.

Care must be taken to keep core stability while in water and not to over-extend, as water can make one wobbly and over-confident with movement. Weight bearing can be increased in shallower water. Flotation devices are useful if you're a weak swimmer, and water weights increase resistance training.

*Caroline Robertson is a naturopath, first aid trainer and wannabe mermaid. For healing holidays, consultations or guided meditations see [carolinerobertson.com.au](http://carolinerobertson.com.au).*



### Spa escape

You don't have to drown in debt to try hydrotherapy. DIY hydrotherapy could be a foot soak, an Epsom salts bath, a splash in the sea or a hot/cold shower. A home hydrotherapy practice to improve skin or circulatory, lymphatic or digestive issues is alternating hot/cold compresses or showers for two minutes each for a six-minute session.

For a champagne experience, consider these top hydrotherapy spas. The Daylesford Region in Victoria, Australia, is a fount of fantastic natural springs. The Avène Center in France is famous for curing skin conditions. Dead Sea spas are cheaper on the Jordan side than on the Israeli coast. Treatments incorporate the potent Dead Sea mud and saltwater baths, which are amazing for the complexion and for anti-ageing.

Ayana Resort & Spa in Bali, Indonesia, has an aquatonic pool filled with 700 million litres of seawater and 12 hydro-massage stations. AIRE Ancient Baths in Barcelona, Spain, boasts five thermal baths, including a flotarium for floating and aromatherapy steam rooms.

The new Arctic Bath in Harads, Swedish Lapland, is a floating hotel with an outside cold bath, a hot bath and saunas. Ojo Caliente in New Mexico, USA, is a desert oasis with hot springs, with four different sulphur-free, healing mineral waters.

Wherever you wander, enjoy your water journey. As Rumi wrote, "When you do things from your soul, you feel a river moving in you, a joy."