

Zeitschrift: Helvetia : magazine of the Swiss Society of New Zealand
Herausgeber: Swiss Society of New Zealand
Band: 79 (2013)
Heft: [3]

Artikel: Hydrotherapy - an easy (did I say easy?!!!) way to keep healthy
Autor: Fill-Weidmann, Trudi
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-943746>

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Health Corner

Hydrotherapy—an easy (did I say ‘easy’?!!!) way to keep healthy



Wasser

When it's hot, we drink cold drinks, eat ice cream, want cold showers, cold dips. When it's cold, we want hot baths, hot drinks, hot water bottles. This cuts right across what some cultures and therapeutic methods successfully follow. African countries are known for their spicy hot teas which are savored in the blazing heat of that region. Ayurveda stipulates that cold water generally has a strongly astringent shock effect on the digestive system and propose the drinking of only warm water.

I stipulate that to step out of a hot shower, particularly in winter, leaves the body unarmed for the demands of the day, the pores wide open for all the bacteria to cozily procreate until such time as the defenses are regrouped – and I dutifully attempt to prevent this by finishing every shower with a cold blast. I am supported in this by the therapy that Father Kneipp in Woerishofen has practiced and successfully applied to hundreds of people for decades: Hydrotherapy.

Sebastian Kneipp was born as a weaver's son in 1821 and as a young man contracted tuberculosis. His dream of becoming a priest was in jeopardy. A shortened bleak future, cooped up in one of the mountain cure houses awaited him. So he took his health into his own hands and followed the idea of a doctor from the 18th century to 'wash himself well'.

This consisted of drinking a lot of pure water, and having an immersion in cold water several times a week. It worked, and with good health restored, he realized his dream of becoming ordained. His calling was now directed toward healing, and indeed many people sought his help after they heard how he had overcome tuberculosis. He wrote books about it and practiced his technique in a clinical environment.

These days, hydrotherapy is an important insurance-funded component of any rehabilitation programme in the many Health Centres around Europe.

The principle of hydrotherapy lies in the stimulating effect of warm or cold water on the skin. In the professional use of this method, a hose of about 3-4cm diameter with a steady flow of water should be used that is capable of covering a considerable part of the body at the time without splashing it. The water is always first applied to the furthest point from the heart, i.e., the right little toe or the right little finger. The body on the whole needs to be warm and the treatment should be followed by warmth and rest, or some warming exercise for a few minutes.

You can use this method to refresh the mind when feeling a bit sluggish: Pull back your sleeves and run your arms under a cold tap, starting from the little finger and slowly moving the arm forward until the water covers the elbow, then slowly moving back again and ending at the thumb. Repeat this two times and do the same on the other arm. It is as uplifting as a cup of coffee. Dipping your warm feet in cold water for around 20 seconds, or walking barefoot along the beach letting the tide splash your lower legs for a couple of minutes in winter is very invigorating, relieves headaches, nosebleeds and tired sore feet, but is also for a good night's sleep. (Not recommended for people who tend toward bladder or urinary tract infections).

Hydrotherapy treatments can be done as baths or wipes or wraps – cold wraps are applied to relax the body and reduce pain. Warm wraps are often used to stimulate circulation and healing to a certain area, such as neck pain, arthritis, digestive problems or headache. Herbs or vinegar, sometimes cottage cheese or clay are added for stronger effect.

A wrap consists of a linen or cotton cloth dipped in cold or hot water and wrung out and applied to the area, then held in place with a dry layer of cloth, and a third layer of a woolen cloth to hold in the desired temperature for as long as possible. As a rule, the

wrap is removed when the temperature has been evened out by the body – i.e., the cold wrap has warmed, or the hot wrap has cooled. This takes around 45 to 60 minutes. Cold lower leg wraps, for instance, ease sore feet after long walks or standing all day, inflammation, high blood pressure, vein pain, nervousness, and promote a good night's sleep. They are also used to reduce high fever.

Cold abdominal wraps can be done to relieve constipation, high blood pressure, but should not be done while menstruating or when a bladder infection is present. A cold chest wrap is recommended for bronchitis or pneumonia and to reduce fever. A warm wrap is used to remove mucus or for chronic bronchitis. Aromatic oils like menthol or eucalyptus can be used for this wrap to intensify the effect.

Kneipp also promotes the use of dry brushing. This is done with a natural fibre brush such as horse hair or a sisal glove. The skin of the feet, legs, abdomen, hands, arms and back is gently brushed until pink in colour, preferably before a shower or bath.

Together with good moderate diet, a healthy lifestyle which includes a decent amount of physical work and other exercise, as well as fresh air and rest at the right time, Kneipp's teachings go a long way to ensuring good health to a ripe old age. Try it, you've got nothing to lose.

By Trudi Fill-Weidmann

Ancient Hydrotherapy

Hydrotherapy was practiced by the Ancient Egyptians, Greeks and Romans.



Roman Baths, Bath, UK - constructed 60 - 70 AD