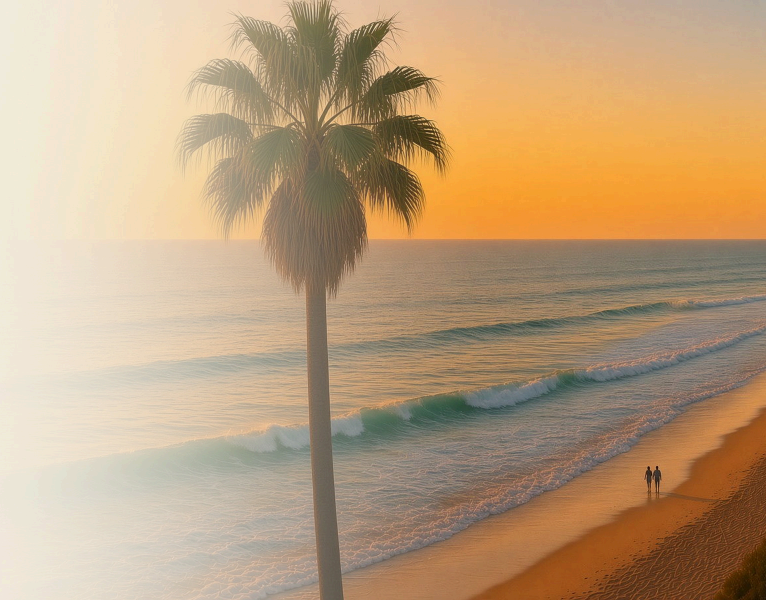
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Sauna and Cold Plunge

Regular sauna use is one of the better-supported heart habits. The cold plunge has shakier evidence and a higher acute risk.

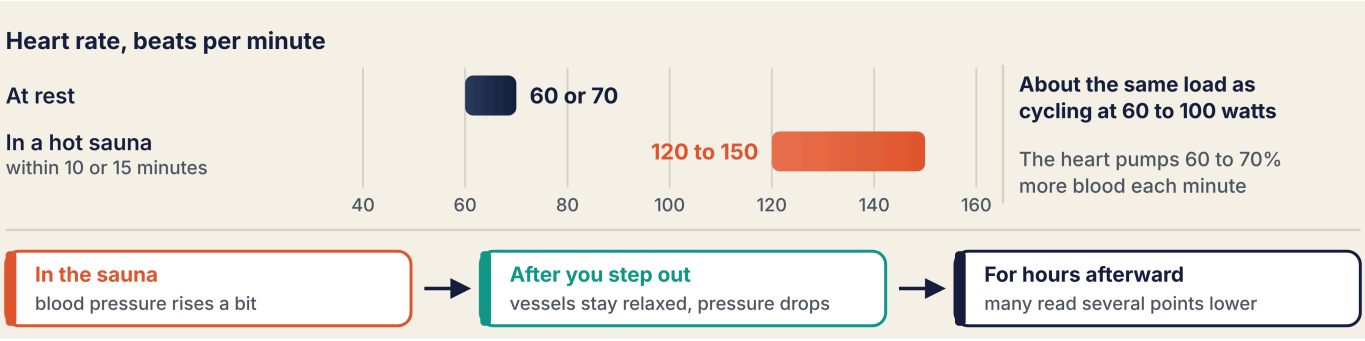
4 to 7
sauna sessions a week, linked with roughly half the rate of fatal heart disease vs. once a week or less

About 60%
lower risk of sudden cardiac death in the same large Finnish study of middle-aged men

60 sec
the first minute in cold water, the dangerous window for a vulnerable heart

WHAT HEAT DOES

A sauna works the heart like moderate exercise



The Finnish study followed thousands of middle-aged men for more than two decades and adjusted for smoking, weight, exercise, blood pressure, cholesterol, alcohol and social and economic status. The signal held up, and the same pattern showed up later in women. Most of those sessions were sober, and most involved no cold plunge afterward.

WHAT COLD DOES

The first minute in cold water

1 Cold shock
Within seconds you gasp, your heart rate jumps, your pressure spikes hard and skin vessels clamp down.

2 Diving reflex
Putting your face in or holding your breath in cold water triggers a reflex that slows the heart at the same time.

3 Mixed signals
One system tells the heart to race and another tells it to slow. Extra beats can follow, and with heart disease, occasionally worse.

Regular cold exposure may slightly help blood vessels and mood in healthy people, though the long-term heart evidence is thin.

Choose the sauna

If you have a heart condition, the sauna is the practice with the better risk-to-benefit ratio. Adding cold immersion on top deserves a specific conversation with your cardiologist before you say yes.

BEFORE YOU STEP IN

Who should skip it, and how to start

SKIP BOTH FOR NOW

sauna and cold plunge

Recent heart attack	No heat or cold extreme in the first two to four weeks. Once you're stable, in cardiac rehab and cleared for moderate exercise, the sauna usually becomes safe again.
Unstable angina	Chest pain that has been changing or coming on at rest.
Severe aortic stenosis	The heart can't raise its output through a very tight valve. You can faint or your pressure can drop dangerously as you cool down.
Decompensated heart failure	The kind with wet lungs and swollen legs, where the fluid shifts of heating and cooling can push a fragile heart over the edge.

ASK FIRST OR TAKE CARE

Stable heart failure	Have a real conversation with your cardiologist before adding sauna sessions.
Rhythm problems	Well-controlled AFib usually does fine in the sauna. Get an unstable rhythm or unexplained palpitations checked first. With easily triggered AFib or a past ventricular arrhythmia, ease slowly into cold water, if you go in at all.
Coronary artery disease	Treat cold plunging carefully, especially with active angina, since the pressure spike and heart rate surge can bring on chest pain or worse.
Beta blockers	They can limit how you adapt to the cold shock. Many people on them plunge without trouble, and it still deserves a real conversation with your cardiologist.
Pregnancy	Ask your obstetrician what's reasonable for the sauna, and avoid full cold immersion.

HOW MUCH AND HOW LONG

Sauna	Start with two to four sessions a week, fifteen to twenty minutes each, at the moderate temperature your facility offers. Four or more a week is where the data look strongest, and longer than twenty minutes isn't better.
Cold, if your heart is healthy	Start with thirty seconds to a minute of cold at the end of a regular shower. Later, a minute or two in 55 to 60°F water. Ease in, breathe through the gasp and never plunge alone.
Hot, then cold	A warm shower or brief cool rinse after a sauna is fine. With known heart disease, skip a full plunge in 50°F water right after the sauna.

STOP AND STEP OUT

Warning signs	Chest pressure or pain, sudden shortness of breath unlike being warm, dizziness that doesn't pass when you sit down, sustained or irregular palpitations, or feeling faint.
What to do	Get out, sit down (somewhere cooler after a sauna) and sip water. Call your doctor if symptoms don't resolve within a few minutes. If chest pain is severe or sustained, that's a 911 call.

WHAT GETS PEOPLE IN TROUBLE

Dehydration and alcohol are the two most common causes of sauna-related medical events. Drink water before and after, take extra care on a diuretic, and don't mix alcohol with sauna or cold plunging. Skip a heavy meal right before either one.

READ THE FULL ARTICLE

damianrasch.com/
sauna-cold-plunge-heart-effects

For education only, and not a substitute for advice from your own physician. Sources include Laukkanen et al. (JAMA Intern Med 2015), Laukkanen et al. (Mayo Clin Proc 2018), Kihara et al. (JACC 2002), Shattock and Tipton (J Physiol 2012), Tipton et al. (Exp Physiol 2017) and the American Heart Association (2022).

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