

Trending Ancient Wellness Tips and Practices

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✓ Fact Checked

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STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › A number of ancient wellness practices are now being embraced and promoted, many of which are rooted in the European wellness tradition
- › Spain has a long history of taking a siesta during the hottest time of the afternoon. The research on napping is mixed, however, with some studies showing benefits while others have come to the opposite conclusion
- › Mud treatments and mud wraps, which have been used therapeutically for 25 centuries, were popularized by the Italians during the Roman Empire. Mud therapy is often referred to as fangotherapy, after the Italian word “fango,” which means “mud”
- › Contrast therapy – a popular tradition in Finland – typically involves the use of sauna followed by cold-water immersion, either in a lake, pool, shower or bath. In the winter, immersing yourself in snow is another option
- › Other trending wellness practices include the Nordic diet, forest bathing and uitwaaien, a Dutch word referring to spending time outdoors in wild and windy weather

As holistic health gains hold, a number of ancient wellness practices are being embraced and promoted. According to a March 2, 2020, article¹ in The Guardian, many of these practices are rooted in the European wellness culture. Following is a sampling of ancient holistic health traditions making a comeback. How many of them have you tried?

The Siesta

Spain has a long history of taking a siesta during the hottest time of the afternoon. To this day, many Spaniards will take a break from work in the afternoon and work later into the evening to compensate. The Guardian quotes Paul Joseph, founder of Health and Fitness Travel:²

"Even just slowing down for a short period of time allows you to disconnect from the world and subsequently boost energy, focus and creativity."

The research on napping is mixed, however, with some studies showing benefits such as lowering the prevalence of heart disease (particularly among working men),³ improving learning,⁴ boosting emotional stability and lowering blood pressure, while others show it may actually increase the risk of high blood pressure, diabetes and cognitive decline, especially in older adults.⁵

While it's unlikely that naps are directly causing these health problems, the association exists nonetheless, and more research is needed to determine who benefits from naps, who doesn't and why.

Mud Treatments

Mud treatments and mud wraps, which have been used therapeutically for 25 centuries,⁶ were popularized by the Italians during the Roman Empire. Mud therapy is often referred to as fangotherapy, after the Italian word "fango," which means "mud."

Mud is generally advertised as having cleansing and relaxing, antistress effects, but science suggests its health benefits may be far-reaching. As reported in the Spanish journal *Anales de Medicina Interna*:⁷

"Mud has a place as a non-pharmacological tool in certain clinical settings, such as degenerative articular processes, skin disorders, and others ... Fangotherapy in arthritis patients seems to cause variations in amino acid

involved in cartilage homeostasis, and also produce reduction in pain ratings in gonarthrosis.

Mud modifies nitric oxide, myeloperoxidase and glutathione peroxidase serum levels in arthritic patients and beta-endorphin and stress hormones in patients affected by osteoarthritis by reducing inflammation, pain and therefore diminishes the cause of stress.

[It] has been confirmed that the thermal stress associated with Fangotherapy activates the pituitary gland ... Furthermore, steroids and antimicrobial activity of certain therapeutic mud has been suggested."

Contrast Therapy

Contrast therapy typically involves the use of sauna followed by cold-water immersion, either in a lake, pool, shower or bath. In the winter, immersing yourself in snow is another option. Sauna bathing has a long history in Finland.

To this day, most homes in Finland have a built-in sauna. Sauna bathing has been shown to strengthen heart health and offer significant protection against cardiovascular diseases,⁸ and adding the contrast of a cold dip afterward can further magnify those effects.

Sauna bathing is one of my favorite therapies as it generates heat shock proteins that repair protein misfolding, which is a major part of aging and disease. I believe this is why all-cause mortality is so radically decreased in Finns who sauna more than five times a week.

Sweating in a sauna will also help eliminate toxins, improve blood circulation, kill disease-causing microbes and improve your mitochondrial function. Research has even shown that regular sauna use correlates with a reduced risk of death from any cause, and may help stave off Alzheimer's disease and dementia.

For example, researchers in Finland found that men who used a sauna four to seven times a week for an average of 15 minutes had a 66% lower risk of developing dementia, and 65% lower risk of Alzheimer's, compared to men who used the sauna just once a week.^{9,10}

Recent research¹¹ has also demonstrated that sauna bathing helps modulate your autonomic nervous system, which governs your stress responses.¹² This helps explain why most people feel "nice and mellow" afterward.

There is a compelling body of evidence showing exposure to harsh conditions can be highly beneficial and that extreme temperature variations help optimize many biological functions. Like exposure to heat, exposure to cold boosts mitochondrial function and numbers. Cold thermogenesis has also been shown to:^{13,14,15}

Strengthen joint tissue and improve	Support weight loss efforts by increasing metabolism
Increase blood circulation	Reduce symptoms of depression and anxiety by at least 50% ¹⁶
Speed rate of recovery following joint or muscle injury ¹⁷	Provide temporary relief lasting about 90 minutes from pain associated with arthritis ¹⁸
Reduce pain and swelling following injury	Reduce your risk of developing cognitive decline and dementia by reducing inflammation and oxidative stress ¹⁹
Reduce inflammation	Improve symptoms of eczema ²⁰
Enhance benefits of physical therapy	Reduce pain associated with migraines when applied to the back of the neck for about 30 minutes ²¹

Improve muscle function and strength

Boost mental focus and attention by increasing production of norepinephrine in your brain.

Norepinephrine can be increased twofold just by getting into 40-degree F. water for 20 seconds, or 57-degree water for a few minutes

Forest Bathing and Uitwaaien

Forest bathing is the English translation of the Japanese term "shinrin-yoku." As the term suggests, it refers to the restorative and "cleansing" effects of spending time in forests and other nature spaces. In Japan, it's a revered and long-standing tradition known to promote health and well-being.

The benefits of forest bathing go beyond the obvious. As explained in the film, "Call of the Forest," trees have medicinal properties.²² For example, limonene, produced by trees, is an anticancer compound used in chemotherapy.

Linolenic acids aid brain functioning and pinenes have antibiotic properties. Inhaling these and other compounds emitted by trees can provide a mildly narcotic effect while boosting immune function and relaxing your body. The soil of the forest also has healing powers, including soil bacteria shown to improve mood, so don't be afraid to get your hands dirty.

The Dutch word "uitwaaien" is a similar term, but refers more specifically to spending time outdoors in "wild, windy weather." According to The Guardian:²³

"By replacing 'bad air' with 'good air,' it is believed to leave you feeling clear-headed and refreshed. 'It feels exhilarating – wind is distracting, so it's sort of meditative, in the sense you cannot think about anything else,' says [Global Wellness Institute research director, Beth] McGroarty."

Without doubt, spending more time in nature is one of the simplest ways to improve your general well-being and emotional health.

A massive study²⁴ involving data from more than 140 trials and 290 million people revealed exposure to greenspace – defined as open, undeveloped land with natural vegetation – led to significant reductions in diastolic blood pressure, salivary cortisol (a physiological marker of stress) and heart rate, along with significant decreases in Type 2 diabetes and mortality from all causes and those specifically related to the heart.

Sources and References

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