

Why Am I Taking Cold Showers?

Shôn Ellerton, June 3, 2024

The thought of jumping into a cold lake or into a cold shower may not be initially appealing, but once you get into it, you're hooked.



Man jumping into cold water in Torquay, England by Shôn Ellerton

I heard that taking a cold shower is good for you. That it will liven you up and give you that great glow of vitality.

Seems popular as well.

I know about that strange and seemingly masochistic pastime of suffering hot saunas and then jumping into icy cold lakes. Something very popular with the Russians and Scandinavians in particular. And of course, the growing popularity of plunge pools, a new one having opened not very far down the road to where I live. This facility has four pools, ranging from a hot and sweaty 40 degrees Celsius down to a frigidly cold 7 degrees Celsius with constant water movement worsening the effect by stemming the relief of a thermal barrier developing between your skin and the water. It seems extreme but it is quite normal to endure these crazy temperatures for up to three minutes alternating from hot to cool pools.

A Finnish friend of mine swears by this treatment, having built a sauna and a plunge pool on his own property. Apparently, regular sauna sessions can stymie the onset of dementia; however, I haven't come across any clear evidence that jumping into an icy bath does any good medically. Some espouse the idea that the shock promotes autophagy which diminishes the effects of ageing, but there is no hard proof of this. Saying that, the glowing feeling and being refreshed is an indicator that doing this on a regular basis isn't such a bad idea.

Not everyone has access to a plunge pool, but most of us have access to a cold shower. Cold showers have been popularised for being either instruments of punishments, for example, within those brutal English boarding schools of yesteryear, or a way of hardening up and being stoic, as for those living or have come out of the military. My father-in-law, being an ex-military man from the Chinese Air Force and now in his mid-70s, only recently stopped taking icy cold showers, even in the middle of winter. He certainly looks damned good for a seventy-year-old but whether this has something to do with a lifetime of uncomfortably cold showers is open for debate.

During summer, I tried out Jiu Jitsu and, predictably, came out worse for wear after having been choked and twisted in knots by those far better than me. My shoulders felt inflamed and sore, and no matter what I did to try to relieve the soreness, the heat remained.

I thought, why not try a cold shower?

My shoulders were so inflamed that I did not flinch at all when stepping into the cold shower. Standing in one position certainly becomes easier as your skin gets used to the temperature, but when moving about, you can certainly feel that cold getting into you. The key is not to hold your breath but to try to relax.

After two to three minutes in the cold shower followed by a little soap to clean, I come out refreshed. However, I soon learned that cold water doesn't have the same cleansing effect with the soap as with warm, so after the two to three minutes, I crank up the water temperature and use soap and then rinse off.

The next few times, there is that tentative moment before stepping in that stream of cold water, but I soon become so used to it, that I was looking forward to cold showers throughout the day. At work, to relieve tiredness, I'd often head off to the shower facility and take a cold shower returning to my desk with renewed vigour. It was becoming a little addictive I might say.

Bear in mind, that this started out in the summer.

After a few months, coming into the middle of winter, the water temperature had been dropping but I was so used to taking cold showers, that it wasn't really much of an issue for me. I didn't realise the change of water temperature until it was cold enough to cause a brain freeze when the stream of water landed on top of my head. I did not like this one bit and thought to myself that this couldn't be a good

thing, so I protected my head with my hands to stop this from happening. Being bald, perhaps a rubber cap wouldn't be a bad idea in future!

There is one other advantage with getting used to cold showers, and it is not related to wellness or health. The ability to sustain a cold shower when hot water is not available. I've had hot water failures at home in the past and I've certainly been on camping trips in which the hot water facilities were not working. Previously, on such occasions, I would swear and shout waiting for the water to get warm and failing that, prefer to remain dirty and grimy until I had access to a warm shower, but now, I'd take the cold shower option without fail.

I've yet to dive into an icy pool, but I'd give it a shot. I remember a group of stalwarts that used to meet halfway up a trail to the top of Pikes Peak in Colorado. They'd camp out there in the middle of winter at night and dive into an icy cold pond. I thought they were crazy but realised that such 'polar bear club' activities were not uncommon around the world.

One doesn't have to be quite so extreme, of course. During a cold morning in Torquay in Devon, England, I saw a group of swimmers diving off the embankment into the beautifully clear water. I can vouch that the water was certainly not very warm.

I later learned, from watching a documentary, of this guy who'd swim for quite long periods of time around ice floes in the middle of the Arctic. There he was clambering away in the clear and icy water while seals were lounging on the slabs of ice. Indeed, the longest ice swim was undertaken by a Polish guy who swam for six kilometres in sub five-degree Celsius waters taking nearly two hours to complete wearing only standard swim kit, goggles, and a swimming cap. This is extreme stuff.

Clearly, there are serious dangers for anyone attempting to do this without proper training or without being physiologically fit to do so. Most people would perish within half-an-hour in icy water, so I would not advise anyone trying this out unless they can get out very quickly!

However, I think the benefits of taking a brief cold-water shower regularly can do a world of good for most people.

But remember to breathe and not to panic.