

CLARITY GUIDES

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SAUNAS & COLD PLUNGE

*Heat, cold and what the evidence really says,
with safe first steps and places in Fife*



Published by Clarity Guides · Cover: Eero Järnefelt (1863–1937), *Chimneyless Sauna*, Finnish National Gallery, Public domain

Preview – full guide coming soon – goclarity.uk

ABOUT THIS GUIDE



Sitting in a hot room and then plunging into cold water is one of the oldest wellbeing habits on Earth. In Scotland it is having a moment: wood-fired saunas now sit on beaches from Kinghorn to Elie, and people dip in the Forth all year round.

This guide explains where these traditions come from, from the Finnish sauna and Russian banya to the Native American sweat lodge and Scottish sea dipping. It looks honestly at what the research does and does not show, sets out who should be careful, and gives simple, safe first steps for saunas, cold showers, cold plunges and contrast therapy. There are fair price ranges for kit and a list of real, checked places to try it in Fife and nearby.

The short version: regular saunas are linked with better heart health in large Finnish studies, but those studies cannot prove cause and effect. Cold water reliably wakes you up and many people say it lifts their mood, but the research is small and early. And cold water can kill, so safety comes first.

Our three labels. **RECORD** means something we can show from a historical document or a published study. **LEGEND** means a story, tradition or popular saying that cannot be checked. **MODERN** means an idea or practice created or reshaped in the last century or so. You will also find paired boxes headed **What people report** and **What the evidence says**.

Not medical advice. This guide is for general information and education only. Heat and cold put real strain on the heart. If you have a heart condition, high or low blood pressure, are pregnant, take regular medicines, have had a stroke or have any doubts, talk to your GP before trying a sauna or cold water. Never mix either with alcohol. Please read the safety chapters (9 and 10) before you start.

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WHAT HEAT AND COLD DO TO YOUR BODY

A sauna and a cold plunge are opposite shocks to the same system. Both make your heart, blood vessels and nervous system work hard for a few minutes, and your body adapts if you repeat them.

✦ IN THE HEAT

RECORD A traditional Finnish sauna is a wooden room heated to about 80–100°C at head height, with low humidity (around 10–20%) until water is thrown on the hot stones. Sessions usually last 5–20 minutes. Your skin temperature shoots up, blood vessels in the skin widen, and your heart speeds up to pump blood to the skin so you can sweat. A 2018 review by the Finnish cardiologist Jari Laukkanen and colleagues reports heart rates of 120–150 beats a minute, similar to moderate exercise, and an average sweat loss of about half a kilogram per session.

Blood pressure often falls a little during and just after a sauna, as blood vessels relax. This is part of why people feel calm afterwards, and also why standing up too quickly can make you dizzy.

✦ IN THE COLD

RECORD Cold water works the other way. The skin's blood vessels clamp shut, blood pressure and heart rate jump, and sudden cooling of the skin triggers an involuntary **gasp** and fast, uncontrolled breathing. This is **cold water shock**. The RNLI counts any water below 15°C as cold, and says the initial effects usually pass in less than a minute. Over the following minutes, cold muscles and nerves stop working well (swimming gets harder), and only much later does true hypothermia set in, generally after at least 30 minutes in adults.

RECORD Cold also releases stress hormones. In a 2000 study, ten young men who sat in 14°C water up to the neck for an **hour** had a 530% rise in blood noradrenaline and a 250% rise in dopamine (Šrámek et al.). Those figures are often quoted for a two-minute plunge; the study did not test that.