

Wellness



Hot, Cold, Rest, Repeat

One minute, you're settling into the enveloping heat of a sauna. The next, you're stepping into a cold plunge or turning the shower dial decidedly in the opposite direction.

That dramatic shift between hot and cold is the basic idea behind contrast therapy, a wellness practice that has become increasingly visible at spas, fitness centers and recovery studios.

WHAT IS IT?

The concept itself is hardly new. Sauna traditions and cold-water bathing have long histories in many cultures. What is newer is the way the two experiences are being packaged together as part of modern recovery and wellness routines.

A typical contrast session may involve spending several minutes in a sauna or other heated environment, followed by a brief cold plunge, cold shower or other cooling period. The cycle may then be repeated. Nordic spas often encourage a short period of rest at the end of the cycle before repeating.

WHY DO IT?

Why voluntarily go from very hot to very cold?



© ADOBE STOCK



© ADOBE STOCK

For some people, the attraction is simply how it feels. Heat can promote a sense of relaxation, while cold im-

mersion can feel intensely invigorating. The alternating sensations can also turn an ordinary sauna visit into a rit-

and a lack of diversity among participants. Contrast water therapy has not consistently proved superior to other recovery methods.

And more extreme does not necessarily mean more beneficial.

CONCERNS

Sudden cold-water immersion causes rapid cardiovascular changes, including increases in heart rate and blood pressure. Moving between sauna heat and cold water also produces significant changes in circulation.

That means contrast therapy isn't appropriate for everyone. People with heart disease, blood pressure concerns or other medical conditions should consult a health care professional before trying cold plunges or dramatic temperature changes. The American Heart Association specifically advises caution with cold-water immersion for people with a cardiac history.

Beginners also don't have to leap directly from a sweltering sauna into an icy tub. A cooler shower or shorter exposure can provide a gentler introduction.

For those who enjoy it and can do it safely, contrast therapy offers something increasingly common in wellness: an old practice given a new setting.

Sometimes relaxation comes wrapped in a warm towel. Sometimes it ends with a very cold splash.

ual that encourages people to pay attention to their bodies and take dedicated time to unwind.

There is also growing scientific interest in both heat and cold exposure. Research suggests cold-water immersion after exercise may reduce muscle soreness and perceived fatigue. Studies of sauna bathing have explored potential cardiovascular and other health effects. Researchers are examining what happens when heat and cold are combined.

The evidence does not, however, support every claim that has accompanied contrast therapy's popularity. A recent review of cold-water immersion found possible effects on stress, sleep quality and quality of life, but also noted that the research remains limited by small studies

Healthier Balance with Technology

Phones help people work, navigate, stay connected, take photos, read the news and summon dinner without speaking to another human being.

They also make it remarkably easy to spend hours looking at a screen without intending to.

That tension is at the heart of digital wellness, an approach that focuses less on abandoning technology and more on using it intentionally. As phones, tablets and computers occupy more of daily life, some people are creating boundaries designed to protect time for sleep, movement, relationships and simple mental quiet.

ESTABLISHING BOUNDARIES

One common culprit is notification overload. Emails, texts, news alerts, social media updates and app reminders can repeatedly pull attention away from whatever is happening offline. Turning off nonessential notifications or using a phone's focus settings during certain parts of the day can create periods with fewer interruptions.

Another challenge is doomscrolling, the habit of repeatedly consuming distressing news or other negative online content. Research

has linked doomscrolling with poorer well-being and lower life satisfaction, while psychologists recommend placing limits around news consumption when constant updates begin increasing stress.

Bedtime can be a particularly useful place to establish a digital boundary. Studies of adults have found associations between electronic device use at bedtime and poorer sleep. Moving the phone away from the bed, setting a time to stop checking messages or replacing late-night scrolling with

reading, stretching or another relaxing ritual can help separate daytime activity from bedtime.

SUSTAINABLE CHANGES

A digital reset does not have to mean disappearing into the wilderness for a week without Wi-Fi. Research into so-called digital detoxes has produced mixed results, suggesting there is no single prescription for how much time everyone should spend offline. More modest changes, such as reducing social media use or

creating device-free periods, may be easier to maintain.

The wellness industry is responding, too. Retreats and destinations increasingly incorporate digital disconnection alongside activities such as mindfulness, nature immersion, breathwork and gentle movement. The Global Wellness Institute identified a broader movement toward less technology-driven wellness experiences in its 2026 trends.

Spas offer a particularly natural opportunity to unplug. Putting a phone in a locker

before a massage, soaking without taking pictures or spending quiet time in a relaxation room can create an hour in which no notification requires an answer.

Technology itself is neither the villain nor the cure. It can connect friends, provide entertainment, facilitate work and offer access to wellness resources.

Digital wellness is simply about deciding when technology is useful and when it might be better to put the screen down.



© ADOBE STOCK

Get Moving for Wellness

Not everyone wants to join a gym, run a 5K or work out for an hour to a video.

Fortunately, movement does not have to look like any of those things.

Physical activity can include walking the dog, working in the garden, dancing in the kitchen, swimming, playing pickleball or taking a bike ride with friends. For people who dislike traditional workouts, finding enjoyable ways to move may make physical activity feel less like another obligation and more like part of everyday life.

FINDING WHAT WORKS

Federal physical activity guidelines recommend that adults aim for at least 150 minutes of moderate-intensity aerobic activity each week, along with muscle-strengthening activity on at least two days. But those minutes do not have to happen in one long workout. Activity can be spread throughout the week and broken into smaller chunks.

That creates plenty of room for creativity.

Walking is one of the simplest options. It might mean taking a stroll through the neighborhood, exploring a local park, walking through a museum or meeting a friend rather than sitting together over coffee. Dancing can range from a formal class to turning on favorite music at home.

Gardening can involve lift-



© ADOBE STOCK

ing, carrying, digging, reaching and walking. Recreational activities such as bowling, golf, kayaking or playing outside with children can get the body moving without being labeled a workout.

Even hobbies can count. Photography might encourage someone to walk farther in search of a good shot. Birding can mean hours spent exploring trails. Community theater,

volunteering, home improvement projects and active travel can all involve more movement than people realize.

SHORT BURSTS

Another approach is the “exercise snack,” a short burst of activity tucked into the day rather than one dedicated exercise session. Research uses several definitions for the term, but the underlying

idea is simple: Brief bouts of movement can add up. That could mean five to 10 minutes of brisk walking, climbing stairs, doing a few strength exercises or stretching between other tasks. Emerging research suggests these short sessions may improve some measures of fitness and provide a practical way to break up sedentary time.

The best form of movement

may ultimately be the one a person is willing to keep doing.

For one person, that might be a yoga studio or fitness center. For another, it could be a garden, dance floor, swimming pool or trail.

Wellness does not require learning to love working out. Sometimes it starts with finding something enjoyable to do and realizing afterward the body was moving all along.

Bouncing Back After Activity

For years, fitness culture celebrated pushing harder, running farther and squeezing in one more repetition. Increasingly, however, wellness routines are making room for something just as important: recovery.

Recovery wellness focuses on helping the body rest and rebound after exercise, physical activity or the wear and tear of everyday life. Once largely associated with professional athletes, recovery tools such as compression therapy, percussion massage, stretching, saunas and red-light treatments have moved into fitness centers, spas and specialized recovery studios.

Nor is it just for competitive athletes. A long day spent standing, a weekend gardening project or the return to exercise after some time away can leave muscles feeling tired and tight. Recovery services offer another way to think about wellness, with less emphasis on performance and more on feeling ready to move again.

TYPES OF RECOVERY THERAPY

Compression therapy is one increasingly visible option that can be done at home, at a spa or at a fitness center. Pneumatic compression systems typically use boots or sleeves that inflate and deflate around the legs or arms. Compression has long been used in medical settings for certain circulatory conditions, while research into its use after exercise suggests it may help reduce perceived muscle soreness and support some measures of recovery.



© ADOBE STOCK

Percussion therapy, often delivered with handheld massage devices, uses rapid pulses against the muscles. Research is still developing, but some studies have found potential benefits for flexibility and range of motion. Many people simply enjoy the massage-like sensation after activity.

Meanwhile, an old recovery standby is enjoying renewed attention: heat. Traditional and infrared saunas are increasingly incorporated into post-workout and general wellness routines. Heat can help muscles feel relaxed, and a sauna session can offer something many recovery plans need just as much as technology: quiet time to unwind.

Red-light and near-infrared therapies, sometimes called photobiomodulation, have entered the recovery conversation. Researchers continue to study their effects on muscle soreness, exercise recovery and other conditions. Results vary depending on factors such as wavelength, dose and treatment timing, making it important to distinguish promising research from sweeping marketing claims.

And recovery does not necessarily require specialized equipment. Gentle stretching, foam rolling, adequate sleep, hydration and rest days remain accessible parts of a well-rounded routine.

CHANGING ATTITUDES

The growing interest in recovery reflects a broader change in attitudes toward fitness. Rest no longer has to mean doing nothing or falling behind. Instead, it can be treated as one part of the process.

Anyone with an injury, circulatory condition, heart condition or other health concern should talk with a health care professional before trying unfamiliar recovery therapies, particularly those involving heat or compression.

For everyone else, the next step toward wellness might occasionally be less about doing more and more about giving the body a chance to catch up.

Sorting the Glow from the Claims

Step into some spas and wellness centers today and the treatment room may be glowing red.

Red-light therapy, also called photobiomodulation, uses red or near-infrared light directed at the skin. Unlike ultraviolet light, it does not tan the skin, and the treatment is generally designed to produce biological effects without heating or damaging tissue.

SORTING THE HYPE

Its growing popularity has led to an equally growing list of claims. Red-light therapy is now offered for everything from skin rejuvenation to workout recovery and general wellness. The challenge for consumers is recognizing that the evidence is stronger for some uses than others.

In cosmetic settings, red-light therapy may be promoted for fine lines, wrinkles, acne or hair loss. The American Academy of Dermatology notes dermatologists use red or near-infrared light for several skin and hair concerns, although results depend on the condition being treated and the device being used. Professional equipment may differ significantly from lower-powered devices designed for home use.

Recovery is another increasingly common use. Photobiomodulation has been studied for its possible ef-



© ADOBE STOCK

fects on muscle performance, soreness and recovery after exercise. Some research involving localized treatment has produced promising results, but findings vary depending on factors such as wavelength, dose and when the treatment is given. A 2025 systematic review of whole-body photobiomodulation, for example, found no clear benefit for exercise recovery or performance, illustrating why findings from one type of red-light treatment

should not automatically be applied to another.

General wellness claims deserve even more scrutiny.

A session in a softly illuminated room may certainly provide an opportunity to relax, and some people enjoy incorporating red-light therapy into a broader wellness routine. But claims that it will detoxify the body, dramatically boost immunity, melt away fat or treat a long list of unrelated health problems should be

approached cautiously unless there is solid evidence behind them.

FINDING THE EVIDENCE

That does not mean the therapy itself is all glow and no substance. Photobiomodulation is a legitimate area of medical research, and some devices have received U.S. Food and Drug Administration clearance for specific purposes, including temporary pain relief.

For consumers, the best questions may be simple ones: What is this particular treatment intended to accomplish? What kind of device is being used? What evidence supports that use? And how many sessions are typically needed?

Red light therapy may have a place in skin care, recovery or a personal relaxation ritual.

Just remember when evaluating wellness claims, a little healthy skepticism can be illuminating, too.

Wellness Begins at Night

Wellness routines can involve workouts, massages, skin care and carefully planned meals. But a foundational part of well-being happens while doing seemingly nothing at all.

Sleep has increasingly taken its place alongside nutrition, movement and stress management as a cornerstone of wellness. That shift has also inspired spas, hotels and wellness centers to develop services specifically designed around rest.

SLEEP ENVIRONMENT

The concept makes sense: Many of the elements that create a relaxing spa experience can create an environment conducive to sleep.

Light is one consideration. A darker room helps signal that it is time to rest, while bright light, particularly late in the evening, can make winding down more difficult. Some sleep-focused spa and hotel experiences use adjustable or specialized lighting to gradually create a nighttime atmosphere.

Temperature matters, too. Sleep environments generally benefit from being comfortably cool, although individual preferences vary. Bedding, pajamas, pillows and even



© ADOBE STOCK

mattress firmness can all affect whether a person feels comfortable enough to settle in.

Sound is another highly personal ingredient. Some people need silence, while others prefer white noise, nature sounds, soft music or guided meditation. Sound machines and apps have made experimenting with a bedtime soundscape relatively easy.

SPECIAL TREATMENTS

Spas have taken those basic ideas further. According to

ISPA's PULSE magazine, spas around the country have created treatments incorporating massage, aromatherapy, meditation, warm towels, weighted blankets, sound therapies and other techniques intended to promote deep relaxation.

Woodhouse Spa, for example, developed a restorative sleep massage and sent guests home with a digital detox bag intended to encourage putting away the phone at bedtime. Other wellness businesses have created nap rooms

where guests can customize lighting, sound and other environmental factors.

Sleep has even become a reason to travel. Sleep tourism ranges from hotel packages featuring specialty beds and spa treatments to properties centered largely around helping guests rest. Rather than packing every available hour with sightseeing, these travelers are making restoration part of the itinerary.

A spa getaway isn't required, however. Many of the same principles can become

part of a nightly ritual at home: dimming lights, reducing screen time, creating a comfortable room, choosing relaxing sounds and establishing a reasonably consistent bedtime.

A massage or spa treatment can provide a luxurious invitation to slow down. The lasting benefit may come from carrying that idea home.

In a culture that has sometimes treated exhaustion as evidence of productivity, making time for sleep can be its own wellness practice.

Wellness Through Creativity

A paintbrush, a journal, a ball of yarn or a favorite song might not look like traditional wellness tools.

But creative activities can offer opportunities to slow down, focus attention, express emotions and simply spend time doing something enjoyable.

Research increasingly supports a connection between participation in the arts and well-being. A World Health Organization review drawing on more than 3,000 studies found evidence that arts activities can play a role in promoting health and well-being across the lifespan.

And creativity can take many forms.

Art-making may be as involved as taking a pottery class or as simple as sketching, coloring or experimenting with paints at home. One small study found that 45 minutes of art-making was associated with reduced cortisol levels, a measure commonly used to assess the body's stress response. Participants did not need to be experienced artists to take part.

Writing offers another accessible option. Journaling can provide a private place to sort through thoughts, record experiences or put difficult emotions into words. Research into expressive writing

has found that writing about stressful experiences can reduce intrusive thoughts and may help people process challenging events.

For others, creativity is more physical. Dancing combines artistic expression with movement, while singing or playing an instrument can create a focused break from daily routines. Theater, quilting, woodworking, photography,

gardening and other hands-on pursuits can provide similar opportunities to become absorbed in an activity.

That absorption may be part of the appeal. Creative hobbies ask people to concentrate on what is happening in front of them: the next stitch, brushstroke, chord, dance step or sentence. They can provide a sense of accomplishment without requiring

the activity to be productive in the traditional sense.

Creativity can be social as well. Choirs, dance classes, knitting groups, community theater and art workshops bring people together around a shared activity. Research continues to explore how arts participation may support social connection along with mental and emotional well-being.

No artistic talent is required to make creativity part of a wellness routine. There is no requirement to exhibit the painting, publish the journal entry or perform the song for anyone else.

The finished product may not even be the point.

Sometimes wellness comes from making something simply because the process feels good.



© ADOBE STOCK