Have You Heard of Cryotherapy for Fibromyalgia?

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Cold Water Therapy for Fibromyalgia

One thing I thought I knew about Fibromyalgia after being diagnosed more than a decade ago was that keeping warm is key to avoiding a flare up. But some people swear by cryotherapy and cold-water therapy for Fibromyalgia.

Before taking the (cold) plunge, let's take a look at what they are and how they might help.

What Is Cryotherapy?

Cryotherapy is any treatment which uses freezing or near freezing temperatures. It can be used as a medical treatment to remove warts, low grade skin cancer and other lesions.

Whole body cryotherapy is a non-medical treatment which, as the name suggests, involves immersing the whole body in a dry but extremely cold tank, tub or room.

Devotees claim that cryotherapy carries a range of health and well-being benefits. Immersing the body in ultra-cool air is advertised as being a good treatment for many conditions including fibromyalgia and rheumatoid arthritis, as well as depression and anxiety.

Sometimes cold-water therapy is described as cryotherapy so if you are considering it, ensure you know exactly what type of treatment you are signing up for.

What Is Cold Water Therapy?

Cold water therapy carries similar perceived benefits as cryotherapy but uses cold water rather than cold air.

People have been using cold water therapeutically for centuries. From swimming in freezing lakes to jumping under a cold shower, many people, including athletes, claim that cold water is good for them in a variety of ways.

It's claimed that cold water therapy can be beneficial for depression, improves the circulation, lymphatic and immune systems, and can reduce inflammation in muscles.

Fans also claim it can promote a feeling of well-being, facilitate weight loss and help your body regulate heat and cold more effectively.

There are now companies offering purpose-built cold-water immersion tanks which can be set at specific temperatures. You may see them advertised as cold-water plunge pools, cryotherapy baths or cold-water immersion tanks.

Sessions in a cold-water tank or plunge pool are generally cheaper than dry cryotherapy.

Is Cold Water Therapy Appropriate for Treating Fibromylagia?

The practice of using cold water or ice baths has been in the limelight recently since singer Lady Gaga, who has Fibromyalgia, posted images of herself in an ice bath on her social media accounts.

The theory behind the practice seems to be based on the conclusion that immersion in cold water decreases inflammation and fatigue, lowers perception of musculoskeletal pain, and increases well-being if practiced on a regular basis.

Cold exposure seems to activate the sympathetic nervous system and stimulate the brain release of norepinephrine (an adrenal hormone that can help people feel naturally happier). Cold water therapy can also help increase production of beta-endorphins — these are "feel-good" molecules that can help boost your mood.

Cold water therapy has been described as having the anti-depressant benefits of electric shock treatment.

However, please note that cold water therapy is not recognized as a reliable treatment by any official healthcare organization. For example, the British National Health Service (NHS) recommends warm water swimming and hydrotherapies for easing Fibromyalgia symptoms — it does not mention cold water immersion as a recommended treatment.

Where Can I Get Cold Water Therapy?

Many spas and gyms have plunge pools, and specific cold-water tanks can be found at some treatment centers. Search "cold water therapy near me" to find your nearest center.

It’s worth chatting with your doctors about this as well, as your insurance may cover water therapies in cases of medical need. It is also important to get your healthcare provider’s advice on cold water therapy for fibromyalgia.

You don’t actually need to leave your house to practice cold water therapy for fibromyalgia. Some people buy specific ice or cold-water tubs to use at home. Some are inflatable, some are like bathtubs and some look like hot tubs.

Some people claim to benefit from cold showers. Experts advise you start the shower off at a comfortable temperature and then slowly lower the temperature to 68F (use a thermometer to check). Once at that temperature, continue to stand under the shower for around two minutes.

Many people find alternating warm and cold-water baths, showers or compresses can help ease Fibromyalgia symptoms, although success stories are purely anecdotal.

Is Cold Water Therapy Safe?

Supervised cold water immersion at a reputable venue should be safe as long as you are honest with the staff about all of your health conditions and any medications you are taking. Again, it would be advisable to check with your doctor before trying cryotherapy in any form.

If you book a cold-water therapy session, you should be asked to fill in a form detailing your health conditions and you should be advised exactly how to use the facilities. Be wary if staff do not complete any checks before allowing you to use the facilities.

Winter swimming, swimming in the wild and home cold-water baths which are not fitted with temperature controls can be dangerous, as it can be hard if not impossible to regulate the temperature of the water.

Even healthy people are at risk for hypothermia, shock and drowning in cold water, and the FDA warns that not

enough research has been done on the effects and risks of whole-body cryotherapy in general, so ensure you have the approval of your healthcare provider before engaging in any form of cryotherapy.