How’s Your Sauna Knowledge?
Sauna Secrets Revealed and the “Bare Facts” Known
By Bert Olavi Jalasjaa

Over the years, misconceptions about the sauna have become accepted as “fact”, because enough people have accepted second-hand information unknowingly as the truth. Unfortunately, this is a reflection of the lack of accurate information and facts. Many of the facts and truths are obvious; while others are more subtle. You may disagree with some points, but it is time to separate fact from fallacy.

Q: After throwing some water onto the rocks, I always get wet with perspiration. Does increasing the humidity make you perspire more?
A: NO. You perspire more in dry heat because surface moisture on the body quickly evaporates. Increasing the humidity slows down the rate of evaporation, allowing the skin to become wet.

Q: Is it a good idea to close in the area under the benches to make the sauna easier to heat?
A: NO. Closing in the benches can change the natural air flow and heat distribution of the sauna because air must be free to circulate through the benches. Any savings in the cost of heating the sauna is so nominal as to not pay for the cost of the extra materials used.

Q: Is it dangerous to use the sauna more than three times a week?
A: NO. If you have the time to enjoy the sauna everyday, you should do so. Daily saunas cannot harm your health as evidenced by the many Finns and healthy sauna-converts that make the time available to use their saunas daily.

Q: Will the sauna help clear my oily skin and complexion?
A: YES. The perspiring and the cleaning process of the pores is very thorough, so body oils, skin pollutants, and dead skin cells can be easily released and washed away. Skin care specialists all agree that maintaining a clean skin is a very important part of skin health. Teenagers with normal skin disruptions will find the sauna very helpful in removing body oil and other irritants, and in promoting the growth of new skin cells. Scandinavian women are well-known for their youthful appearance and excellent skin complexions.

Q: Is my 5’ x 5’ area big enough for a sauna?
A: YES. Saunas can be built into any unused space, big or small. A 5’ x 7’ size is ideal for a small home sauna as it is big enough for the entire family. Saunas are available to fill every space.

Q: Do I need to install water lines to the sauna?
A: NO. Water lines are not necessary for the sauna. They are needed, however, for a nearby shower. The sauna bucket can be filled occasionally from the shower or laundry room taps.

Q: Is a heater that brings the sauna up to temperature in 15 minutes a good heater?
A: NO. The effectiveness of a heater should not be measured in how fast it heats the air in the sauna, but how well it performs, considering the rock capacity of the heater. A typical sauna room should warm up in about 30 minutes. The heater rocks need to heat up sufficiently for the sauna walls to absorb some of the heat and become suitably warm.

Q: Can I use my sauna if I have heart problems or high blood pressure?
A: YES. But only on your doctor’s advice. People with major heart ailments are often advised not to use a sauna. Using the sauna regularly does not increase one’s blood pressure nor does it solve the cause of the problem. Those accustomed to regular saunas are usually encouraged to continue their lifestyle in moderation.

Q: Do I need to have a floor drain in my sauna?
A: NO. The majority of saunas today do not have a floor drain. Very little water is actually used in the dry sauna heat. A drain is convenient though, for cleaning.

Q: Can I use a urethane finish on my wood walls?
A: NO. Any hard finish that prevents the wood from “breathing” will increase the wood temperature. Furthermore, a finish with a hard surface or “skin” will eventually assume the actual sauna temperature.

Q: Is it safe to stay in the sauna longer than 10 minutes?
A: YES. A person should stay in the heat as long as they are comfortable. A maximum period of 10 minutes is often publicized as the maximum time that anyone should stay in, but other people remain for 20-30 minutes at a sitting. Personal taste, comfort and experience dictate the length of time in the sauna. The maximum time for experienced sauna users is 30 minutes.

Q: Can I use the sauna and throw lots of water onto the rocks?
A: YES. Most sauna heaters are built for wet operation and this is an issue of personal preference. Stainless steel heaters will hold up over time better than galvanized. Remember, water is ladled onto the heater, not a bucket of water dumped on top!
Q: Should I insulate the concrete floor in the sauna?
A: NO. There is no significant heat loss through the floor as the floor temperature is normally about 80°F (27°C). A framed floor with insulation and T&G wood should be avoided as the potential for trapping moisture within the floor is very high.

Q: I’ve been told that you cannot use any preservative in the sauna, as the wood should be left natural. Is that true?
A: YES and No. Many saunas are left natural as a matter of choice. With new preservatives now available for saunas, the use of a preservative is a matter of personal choice. But, a preservative which “seals” the wood, not allowing the wood to breathe, will cause the temperature of the interior wood walls to rise which is undesirable. And, for those with upper respiratory difficulties, the inhalation of fumes is not recommended.

Q: The Finns beat themselves an each other with leafy twigs. Do they like pain?
A: NO. There is no pain. Birch whisks that become rough or “twiggy” are discarded. The bristling action of the birch leaves against the body stimulates the blood circulation in the skin and represents a form of skin massage. Finns also enjoy the natural woody smell from the birch leaves.

Q: Should the inside corners of the sauna be caulked for a good seal?
A: NO. The use of a caulking is quick immaterial, it will melt in the sauna heat. Only the cool bottom of the walls should be sealed with caulck to prevent water leakage.

Q: Can I operate my sauna inexpensively?
A: YES. The electrical hook-up is normally a 30 amp 240 volt connection, so the total kilowatts consumed is not high. A 5’ x 7’7” sauna with a 6kw heater operated over 2.5 hours should cost about $1.00-$1.50 and much less for only 1 hour of use. The heater runs one-third of the time to maintain temperature.

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Q: My sauna would be very small. Can I use a hinged bench above the heater to give me more bench length?
A: NO. Benches above the heater would not only be unusable (the heat would be intolerable) but a severe fire hazard would be created by having any wood material above the heater.

Q: Is the sauna effective for losing weight?
A: NO. A slight weight loss can be experienced due to loss of fluids, but fluid replacement returns the body weight to normal.

Q: Will the sauna create excessive steam or humidity in the house?
A: NO. The only “steam” or moisture derived in the sauna occurs from water thrown onto the rocks. Heating and using the sauna without water on the heater rocks will not increase humidity in the house. The reverse is true — a large electric heater like a sauna heater has a tendency to dry out the home slightly. Many homes require humidifiers which add 6-10 gallons of water to maintain a comfortable moisture level during winter months. One or two cups of water on the sauna heater does not create a moisture hazard. However, if someone wants to use the sauna as a steam bath, tossing gallons of water on the heater, they will have a moisture problem that will require venting to the outside.

Q: should pregnant women use the sauna during the last half of their pregnancy?
A: YES. The warming effects are comfortable for the unborn baby and relaxing for the mother, and the sauna temperature can be lowered for comfort. Expectant mothers are usually cautious enough to avoid anything extreme in the sauna. Consult your doctor and follow that recommendation.

Q: Can asthma sufferers use the sauna?
A: YES (qualified). Some asthmas sufferers do not enjoy the effects from the heat and should not use the sauna when bothered by asthma. Sinuses may run as a result of the heat. Many people, even with severe asthma, report that the sauna helps clear up congestion and that the effect lasts for days.

Q: I want to put a small window in my sauna, should I use a thermal glass unit to prevent heat loss?
A: NO. Small glass areas are usually made of heavy plate or tempered glass. The actual “heat loss” is quite insignificant when compared to the expense of a thermally-sealed unit.

Q: What do I use to clean my sauna... and how often?
A: Use plain water or add a little mild detergent to gently wash down the sauna benches and other areas which come into contact with the body. It is advisable to clean the sauna after each use, but once a week can suffice.

Q: How do I take care of the outside of my sauna... and make it match my home’s exterior?
A: The roof of the outdoor sauna can match your home. The exterior of the sauna can also be altered by painting, staining, or stuccoing the exterior.

Q: How long will the heating elements last on my sauna?
A: Since Finnleo heaters have been manufactured, the heating elements average 12 years of life expectancy. But if someone is “dumping” buckets of water on the heater, it won’t last as long. Water is ladled onto the heater, not in vast quantities.

Q: Is there a special type of rock needed to put in the sauna heater?
A: YES. Peridotite rocks from Finland are the rocks of choice for any sauna heater. Metamorphic or igneous rocks must be used to survive the high temperatures of a sauna. Sedimentary rocks such as river rocks, cannot tolerate the repeated high temperatures and have been known to crack and “explode”. Peridotite rocks will absorb most of the moisture in the sauna and much of the odor. Pouring water on the rocks when cooled, they continue to absorb the water. The elements heat the rocks, which then gives off a soft radiant heat to the sauna!