

Shake your toxins: Get a molecular cleansing

Joanne Chianello
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What if there was a treatment -- totally painless -- that would allow your body rid itself of toxins, stimulate your feel-good endorphins, provide pain relief from arthritis, fibromyalgia, muscle spasms and joint stiffness, improve skin, help reduce cellulite and burn 300 to 600 calories to boot?

Sounds too good to be true, but that's the promise of -- are you ready? -- the Far Infrared Sauna, or FIRS for those in the know. Offered in Ottawa at The Prana Group in the Glebe, this looks and feels more or less like a regular sauna, but it's not.

Here's the dummy's version (mine) of how it works: Sunlight is made up of different waves of light that together produce the light we see every day. Some are visible -- like those in a rainbow -- and some are not. These include ultraviolet rays that we've all heard about, as well as infrared rays.

The infrareds come in three varieties: near, medium and far. The great thing about the far-infrared rays is that unlike those in visible light, they can penetrate about three centimetres into the body. The sauna uses ceramic heaters to emit an electrical current in the same frequency as the far-infrared ray wavelength -- seven to 14 microns, for those who actually understand microns.

Now here's the part that's really freaky. Far-infrared rays have the same frequency as water molecules, which resonate at 9.4 microns, or smack in the middle of the far-infrared ray wavelength.

This causes your water molecules to vibrate and literally shake off those pesky toxins, says Monique Andrews of The Prana Group, which has been operating for about four years. (The Prana partners like to say their practice "combines an eastern philosophy of wellness with a strong foundation of western science.")

"When you have toxins in the body, it causes water molecules to clump together, holding the toxins in little clusters," says Andrews, a chiropractor with a master's degree in neuroscience. "The FIRS breaks those bonds, thereby releasing the toxins."

The sauna can also help get rid of fat.

"Typically we see the highest level of toxicity in fat cells," says Andrews, "but they're all stuck together (the water, fat and toxins). When water is drawn out of the body, the fat is released too."

I've had two treatments at the Glebe facility and although it seemed to me much like other saunas I've had, afterwards I felt fantastic. My sauna was set at only 54 Celsius and if that sounds hot, consider that regular ones are often set as high as 93. It's also a dry sauna that reportedly doesn't create the respiratory problems some experience with conventional steam saunas.



CREDIT: Jean Levac, for Style Weekly
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Chiropractor Monique Andrews of the Glebe's Prana Group operates a far-infrared sauna. Proponents say this type of sauna vibrates water molecules inside the body, literally shaking off toxins.

I didn't sweat for the first 15 minutes -- apparently because my toxic load was preventing me from perspiring right away. But when I was done, I was soaked and I felt amazing -- happy, like I had gone for an invigorating run. I have no idea if my toxins were released, but I thought, "I could get used to this."

And when I was told I had used up to 600 calories by just sitting there, I felt even better.

Some of the companies that make FIRS have been around for 10 years, but The Prana Group got theirs only a year ago. Proponents of the sauna's benefits point to a host of studies about the healing properties of FIRS. One study from the Journal of Cardiology looked at the effects of the special sauna on congestive heart failure and found that, generally, repeated exposure increases blood flow. A medical journal called Anti-cancer Research found evidence that far-infrared rays inhibited the growth of mammary tumours in mice. Sunlight Saunas, a U.S.-based manufacturer of FIRS, boasts dozens of testimonials from users and medical doctors on its website.

The treatment isn't covered by most health plans. A half-hour session at the Prana Group is \$42.80 (including GST) and an hour is \$64.20. Packages offer better deals; the number of sessions you need depends on your toxic load. Andrews recommends a "soft detox" twice a year, which would entail two saunas a week for about five weeks. Ten half-hour sessions cost \$321 and a one-hour package of 10 sessions goes for \$481.

The people who use The Prana Group's far-infrared sauna vary widely, from post-chemo patients to people interested in weight loss to those wanting to alleviate arthritis symptoms or boost their immune systems. If you're trying to purge specific poisons, such as chemicals left over from chemotherapy, or you are suffering from other symptoms (chronic pain or fatigue, for example), a different program may be recommended to you.

Julie Brunelle had been going to The Prana Group for about a year when one of the practitioners suggested that she was carrying too much cellulite for her size, an indication that her body was holding on to too many toxins. Brunelle signed up for the sauna twice a week for two months. Immediately after her first treatment, she says, she felt better, was less stressed and people told her her skin looked radiant. She says she also liked the "clean, internal warmth" she felt after her treatment.

Because the 31-year-old artist is in university for a year, she can't afford to take the treatment as often as she'd like, but she still goes periodically, sometimes as often as once a week. After the first six months, she says, "I really saw the difference in cellulite.

"People think I lost weight, but really my body just changed." She laughs that she's "a bit addicted to the thing."

Wondering how many toxins you're carrying around? The Prana Group offers a "bio-impedance analysis," a procedure that sends a benign electrical current through your body that measures the resistance and reactance of your cells, showing how much of a toxic burden you're under. (It's \$100 for the test, an explanation of results and recommendations for treatment.)

Andrews reluctantly accepts that many think of The Prana Group as an "alternative" health centre, but she says doctors are referring patients to them and that in the U.S. these and other "alternative electrical" treatments are used to treat the sickest cancer and AIDS patients.

The concept seems to be catching on here. I called to get a toxic screen and couldn't get an appointment for more than a week. I can't wait.

The Prana Group is at 151D Second Ave. See www.thepranagroup.com or call 230-0909.

Joanne Chianello is an Ottawa writer.