

Are Cold Plunges Harmful or Beneficial? New Research from Experts

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The skin on my thighs prickled and stung as I eased myself into the chilly waters of Beauvert Lake in Jasper. Steeling myself, I dunked to chest height and took a few strokes forward. I swam out before turning to look back nervously at my instructor, who mouthed, “Breathe, breathe.”

On my visit, the water was about 3 C, the temperature inside the typical household fridge, compared to the usual 27-29 C of the ocean water down south on Mexican beaches in the summer. Although my favourite part of the hydrotherapy circuit at any spa is always the cold plunge, it surprised me that my chest constricted and, without my instructor’s support, I may well have panicked and swam back to shore, giving up on it.

Once I took her advice, my breathing slowed, my limbs relaxed and I was able to take in the wonder of the mountains reflected upon the surface of the glacial-fed water for about five minutes.

For me, it was an epic adventure.

When we talk about adventure, we often think of summits, distance or danger. But sometimes, the hardest thing to do is simply stand still and step in. The water was snowmelt-cold. The air smelled of pine and smoke-tinged memory, a reminder of the wildfires that threatened this region just last year. And the experience? Surprisingly, it wasn't about thrills—it was about stillness and listening to my breath.

The Glacial Plunge Ritual

Once in, I didn't want to get out, although Meagan Huibers, Certified Glacial Plunge Facilitator at the Jasper Park Lodge, advises, "Sixty seconds max is essentially all you need to really reap the benefit of cold-water therapy."

In her coaching approach, it's more about mind-body awareness, breathwork and gradual adaptation than pushing for long durations. Rather than a bracing dip alone, it's offered as part of a wellness ritual that includes mental preparation, breathwork, cold immersion and then gentle rewarming, which can include using the barrel sauna or hot tub and enjoying a cup of tea. You're given water shoes to make navigating the smooth stones on the lake a little easier and a fluffy robe to cuddle up in after your plunge while you lounge by a cozy cauldron fire pit.

The Science: Benefits and Limits

Cold-water plunging has been rising in popularity and not just by elite athletes or Wim Hof disciples, but by everyday people seeking clarity, resilience and connection to nature. Huibers says that it can be an energizing experience but that some of the biggest benefits are felt emotionally. "It's such a mental battle getting into the cold water. Your mind tells you it's hard, you can't do it, that you need to get out but when you can gain control of your mind through breath, that's the ultimate benefit."

Afterwards, I felt very calm and relaxed. Although I enjoyed the experience and felt quite proud of myself, I began to wonder if there were actual scientific benefits to this practice, not just placebo effects.

A systematic review of randomized clinical trials published in the [International Journal of Physiotherapy and Research](#) found that taking a cold water plunge after exercise can help your body switch into recovery mode faster, which may improve how quickly you bounce back from physical activity.

Another study by the [International Journal of Circumpolar Health](#) found that regular cold water plunges improve mental health and shorten colds. Combining cold plunges with breathwork boosts these benefits even more, helping mood, reducing physical complaints and speeding recovery from illness.

However, recent research from the [University of Applied Sciences and Arts of Southern Switzerland](#) found that for women, in particular, cold and hot water plunges may not be effective recovery methods after muscle-damaging workouts.

So, what does this mean? More research is needed into the full benefits of cold-water therapy for athletes and fitness enthusiasts. Personalized recovery strategies, such as active recovery, proper nutrition, stretching and massages, may be more beneficial than cold plunges alone. The best course of action is to consult with a healthcare professional or sports medicine specialist before starting any cold or hot water recovery routine.

How Cold Water Impacts the Heart

Regardless of the effects, a cold-water plunge can be a strong shock to your body, so it's important to take care of your heart health when trying it. As [Dr. Aaron Feingold](#), Chair of Cardiology at JFK University Medical Center, explains, "When the body comes into contact with cold water, our sympathetic nervous system is stimulated. This leads to narrowing of blood vessels, increased heart rate and elevated blood pressure. In healthy people, this 'cold shock response' can strengthen the cardiovascular ability to adapt. But it can be a double-edged sword and requires caution."

That's why Huibers says everyone should always follow their doctor's advice, and that the experience should be undertaken slowly and with a facilitator to monitor their response. "Pay attention to your body. You don't need to stay in the full 60 seconds. If it's too much, get out." She also says participants should, "Watch for signs like uncontrollable shivering, a sudden drop in energy, trouble speaking or struggling to catch your breath, as those can be signs of hypothermia." If any of those symptoms are observed, it's vital to get the person to a warm place immediately, remove wet clothes, warm them gradually, offer warm drinks if possible and seek emergency medical help right away.

Dr. Feingold advises caution for certain groups, especially those with existing cardiovascular conditions. "Patients with coronary artery disease, arrhythmias, uncontrolled hypertension or heart failure face increased risks during cold exposure," he explains. However, he also highlights promising findings from recent research: "Cold exposure can improve heart rate variability, enhance the body's ability to return to calm after an initial surge and may benefit the inner lining of our blood vessels by subjecting them to repeated cycles of increased blood flow followed by recovery."

However, he cautions that "Research is still emerging, with many studies having small sample sizes or short follow-up periods. The science is promising but needs more robust, long-term clinical trials."

Although more research should be done on the scientific proof of health benefits from cold plunging, there's no denying that it can be a bonding experience, as Huibers explains, "The cold brings people together. It's a shared moment of resiliency, connection with nature, and connection with others."

Whether you're plunging in style on the frozen lake at Jasper Park Lodge, surrounded by snow-dusted peaks, the quiet stillness of the Rockies and the chance of spotting elk watching from the shoreline, or stepping into a tub at your local gym or physio clinic, this ritual can offer a powerful reset when done mindfully, safely and with care.

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I am a British parenting and travel writer living in Canada. My work has appeared in National Geographic, Lonely Planet, Travel + Leisure, The Guardian, The Globe and Mail, The Toronto Star, The Sunday Times, and many more. I love to chronicle the weird and wonderful, wherever I go. You can follow me on Instagram @fionatapptravels or on Twitter @fionatappdotcom



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Severe weather events, like tornadoes, don't happen often, but when you're outdoors in the elements, it's prudent to be vigilant.