

One week at a health spa improves your health, study shows

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Take off those Thanksgiving pounds with a week at a spa retreat. A new study shows that not only are they relaxing and nourishing, but they are safe and a week-long spa stay can correspond with changes in our physical and emotional well-being.

New research from Thomas Jefferson University Hospital evaluated 15 participants before and after their visit to We Care [Spa](#), a health and wellness spa in Desert Hot Springs California, and found the program safe and helped to improve the participants' health. Their complete findings will be available in the December issue of *Integrative Medicine, A Clinician's Journal*.

"Programs such as these have never before been formally evaluated for their safety and physiological effects," says Andrew Newberg, MD, director of research at the Jefferson-Myrna Brind Center of Integrative Medicine and lead author on the study. The authors' pilot study is one of the first to attach scientific data to the outcomes of a health and wellness spa stay.

The week-long program included diet modification, meditation and colonic hydrotherapy, voluntarily participation in low-risk hatha and Vishnu flow-yoga programs, and a juice-fast cleansing very low calorie diet of approximately 800 [calories per day](#). Stress management was provided through daily structured meditation and yoga programs as well as time for personal meditation encouraging deep breathing, heightened awareness and a calming effect.

In preparation, participants were asked to modify their diet three to four days prior to arrival by replacing a normal diet with fruit, sprouts, raw and steamed vegetables, salads, vegetables, herbal teas, prune juice in the morning, laxative teas or herbal laxatives nightly and avoiding pasta, meat, cheese, caffeine, alcohol and processed foods.

The participants, 13 women and two men between the ages of 21 and 85, with no history of significant medical, neurological or [psychological conditions](#) each underwent a physical evaluation including weight, height, [Body Mass Index](#) (BMI), blood pressure and an EKG test. They also received a complete blood count (CBC), liver function tests, tests measuring cholesterol and triglycerides, thyroid hormone testing, and the concentration of metals such as mercury and lead. In addition, psychological and spiritual measures before and after their arrival were measured.

An evaluation of the results showed that undergoing a spa program resulted in a weight decline of an average of 6.8 lbs., a 7.7 percent decrease in diastolic blood pressure as well as a decrease in mercury, sodium and chloride levels and a 5.2 percent decline in cholesterol level and mean BMI. Cholesterol level decline seemed to be curiously associated with a decline in HDL's, the good-for-you high density lipoproteins, which is of some concern, though they remained within the range regarded as beneficial. Hemoglobin increased 5.9 percent. No statistically significant changes in liver or thyroid function and no EKG changes were noted.

No serious adverse effects were reported by any individual, but the study noted changes in the participants' sodium and chloride concentrations, suggesting that those interested in going to a spa program should check with their physician to make sure they do not have any medical problems or medications that could put them at risk for electrolyte disturbances.

Improvements in anger, tension, vigor, fatigue and confusion were also noted as was a statistically significant improvement in anxiety and depression levels measured by the Speilberger Anxiety Scale and the Beck Depression Index. Participants also reported significant changes in their feelings about spirituality and religiosity.

While beneficial, it is not possible to differentiate the effects of each of the individual elements of the program to determine which components were responsible for the changes observed. "This," says Newberg "will require an evaluation of one or more elements—such as yoga, very [low calorie diet](#) or colonics—in isolation to determine which elements have the most significant effects." In the future Newberg and colleagues look to study the effects of a spa stay on specific disease population, i.e. diabetics. The authors also encourage spa participants to consult their physician before attending this or similar programs and research the center vigorously for safety and efficaciousness.

Provided by Thomas Jefferson University

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