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Chillin' time: Cryotherapy draws athletes, others for icy-cold treatments

HIGHLIGHTS

A cryotherapy session involves exposure to temperatures as low as minus-270 Fahrenheit

Quick immersion in super-chilled air draws users seeking pain relief, athletic recovery

Greater Sacramento has three cryotherapy centers open to the public



Rachel Raman demonstrates the cryotherapy treatment offered at Cryobath during its May 15 opening in Sacramento. | **Hector Amezcua** - hamezcua@sacbee.com

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Members of the Sacramento Kings team do it. Former Los Angeles Lakers player A.C. Green does it. Even Sacramento Mayor Kevin Johnson has endorsed it.

It's cryotherapy, a body-chilling technique said to decrease inflammation and reduce muscle soreness by a patient's enduring a short blast of super-cold air. Its adherents include elite athletes and other wellness-seekers.

The treatment, which involves standing for two to five minutes in temperatures as low as minus-270 degrees Fahrenheit, has been available in Europe for several decades, but has been offered in the United States only through walk-in centers in recent years. There are three locations in the Sacramento region, including one that opened earlier this month.

Former NBA player Green launched his new business venture, Cryobath, in Sacramento, with an appearance by Sacramento's mayor. Green is the first local competitor to



Dr. Tony Serna and former Lakers player AC Green talk during the opening of Cryobath in

US Cryotherapy, which opened in Roseville in 2011 and now has a second location in Davis.

Sacramento on Friday, May 15, 2015.
| HECTOR AMEZCUA /
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Kevin Kramer, a former pharmaceutical executive and owner of US Cryotherapy, said the staff has given about 225,000 treatments between his two locations since opening about five years ago.

“We’re in an anti-aging society,” he said. “People are looking for modalities that can help them heal, and everyone’s willing to pay out of their pocket to feel better.”

Cryotherapy is based on what happens to a body when exposed to extremely cold temperatures. When cold air shocks the system, it quickly draws blood to vital organs. Afterward, as the person warms up (by running on a treadmill at the Sacramento centers), blood returns to the extremities, such as hands and feet, resulting in an endorphin release, a circulatory benefit and a reduction in inflammation.

Users report feeling less stressed and more invigorated, and have a 30 to 40 percent decrease in recovery time from injuries, Kramer said.

Zeb Armstrong, 32, said he has been using cryotherapy for the past six months to help with injuries sustained while dirt biking a few years ago.

“I come when my knees and ankles hurt,” the Lincoln resident said. “I know there are benefits for my muscles and joints. I don’t mind the cold at all, and now that it’s summer it’s even better.”

Essentially it’s an ice bath with a lot more chill, said Dr. Marty Reed, a Kaiser Permanente orthopedic surgeon who serves on a team of doctors that care for Kings players. He said some players use cryotherapy to reduce soreness and muscle pain.

“It’s ideally suited for people who are active at a high level for short periods of time,” Reed said.

The local cryotherapy centers operate differently. One session in Kramer’s walk-in cold chamber, which is maintained by a powerful refrigerator not unlike a meat freezer, costs \$45. It includes a localized treatment – cold air directly to one area – and a follow-up massage on a hydro-bed.

There’s a pre-chamber, where you can acclimate to the frigid temperature, before stepping into the treatment room for about three minutes. The cryotherapy chamber is large enough to accommodate several people at once, such as a high school sports team.

Customers at Green’s cryobath, which is a small, closed stall super-chilled by liquid nitrogen, stand with their head and neck above the stall. The cost for a three-minute session is \$75.

Though European studies have shown that cryotherapy has applications for post-surgical patients and those with chronic disease, the practice has not yet been validated by the U.S. medical community. A 2014 study by the National Institutes of Health found “weak evidence” that cryotherapy “enhances parasympathetic reactivation or alters inflammatory pathways relevant to sports recovery.”

While not a proven therapy, it nevertheless attracts a wide range of users, from high school and college rugby and basketball teams to individuals with back pain.

The treatment has been extremely popular with customers so far, said Green, who envisions a nationwide chain.

“We all feel pain and stress, and this is a relief,” he said. “It never hurts to give it a try.”

Video: Taking the plunge in a cryotherapy ice bath

Sacramento Bee writer Ed Fletcher takes a Cryobath at the opening of Cryobath in Sacramento on Friday, May 15, 2015 with Dr. Tony Serna and former Los Angeles Laker AC Green. Video by Hector Amezcua, The Sacramento Bee, hamezcua@sacbee.com

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CRYOTHERAPY AT A GLANCE

- What it is: A brief, super-chilled exposure to the body, designed to provide pain relief or a quick recovery from strenuous physical workouts. The therapy has not been extensively studied, but has proved popular with athletes and everyday consumers.
- How it works: Users remove most clothing, except for shorts and a top (for women). They wear gloves, a headband, face mask and socks to protect extremities. A typical session lasts three minutes.
- How cold: Temperatures in a cryotherapy chamber range from minus-166 Fahrenheit to minus-270.
- Cost: From \$45 to \$75, depending on length of exposure and type of session

Source: Bee research

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