Soaking in hot mineral pools once a week significantly improved the symptoms of osteoarthritis and reduced the amount of medication taken by people with the condition, according to a recent study.

"The effect of balneotherapy on osteoarthritis. Is an intermittent regimen effective?" was conducted by staff of the Asaf-Harofe Medical Center, in Zerifin, Israel, and the Tel Aviv University Sackler Faculty of Medicine, in Tel Aviv, Israel.

Seventy-two people with knee osteoarthritis for more than three months participated in the study. They were randomly assigned to either the no-treatment control group or the balneotherapy group.

Subjects in the balneotherapy group soaked in the natural thermal springs at Chamei Yoav, a spa in central Israel, once a week for six weeks. They bathed in the pools for 15 minutes, followed by one hour of rest, and 15 more minutes of soaking. The water at Chamei Yoav is about 98 degrees Fahrenheit and contains sodium, chloride, bicarbonate, calcium, bromide, magnesium, potassium and sulphate.

All participants were evaluated by the same doctor seven days before the start of the spa therapy, four weeks into the therapy, at the end of the six-week spa-therapy period, and four weeks after the spa therapy had stopped.

Results of the study showed that, after six weeks of spa therapy, there was a significant improvement in symptoms of osteoarthritis in the balneotherapy group, and the improvement was sustained until the end of the study, four weeks after the spa therapy had ended.

After four weeks of spa therapy, there was also a significant improvement in participant and physician evaluation of disease severity. The improvement peaked after the full six weeks of spa therapy, and the peak was maintained until the end of the study four weeks later.

The number of NSAID and/or analgesic tablets taken by subjects in the balneotherapy group was also significantly reduced. There were no such changes in the no-treatment control group.

"We showed that balneotherapy ... on a once weekly basis, might significantly improve symptoms of [osteoarthritis]," state the study's authors. "Another important observation was the ability of our patients to reduce their NSAID and analgesic consumption during this period."

—Source: Asaf-Harofe Medical Center, in Zerifin, Israel, and Tel Aviv University Sackler Faculty of Medicine, in Tel Aviv, Israel. Authors: Moshe Tishler, Oskar Rosenberg, Ofer Levy, Iris Elias and Mirit Amit Vazina. Originally published in the European Journal of Internal Medicine, 2004, Vol. 15, pp. 93-96.
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