
STEAM SAUNAS AUSTRALIA

The Sauna Protocol Guide

Temperatures, session times, frequency, hot–cold contrast,
timing and hydration — what the research supports,
and how to put it into practice at home.

Start here

Most of what makes a sauna session effective comes down to four variables: **how hot**, **how long**, **how often**, and **what you do around the session** (cooling, hydration, timing). This guide gives you working ranges for each, based on the published research — most of it from Finnish population studies of traditional sauna bathing — plus practical notes for infrared. Ranges are deliberately wide: the right dose is the one that feels strong but controlled for *you*.

The quick version

Traditional sauna: 70–90 °C, 10–20 minutes per round, 1–3 rounds with cool-downs in between. Infrared: 45–60 °C, 20–40 minutes. Aim for 2–4 sessions a week to start. Drink 500–750 ml of water per session. Finish with a cool rinse. Evening sessions 1–2 hours before bed tend to help sleep; morning sessions leave you alert.

Temperature: how hot should it be?

Traditional (steam) sauna. The Finnish studies that most sauna research is built on used typical bathing temperatures of roughly **75–90 °C** measured at head height, with brief humidity spikes when water is thrown on the stones (löyly). Beginners should start at the bottom of the range — around **65–75 °C** — and sit on the lower bench, where it can be 10–15 °C cooler than the top bench.

Infrared sauna. Infrared cabins run much cooler — typically **45–60 °C** — because the heaters warm your body directly rather than the air. You still reach a strong sweat; it just takes a little longer and feels gentler. Don't chase traditional-sauna temperatures in an infrared cabin: the design intent is longer, milder sessions.

Sauna type	Air temperature	Typical round	Feels like
Traditional — beginner	65–75 °C	8–12 min	Strong heat, very manageable on the lower bench
Traditional — regular	75–90 °C	10–20 min	The classic Finnish session; löyly adds intensity
Infrared — beginner	45–50 °C	15–25 min	Gentle build; sweat starts around 10–15 min
Infrared — regular	50–60 °C	25–40 min	Deep, steady sweat without harsh air heat

Duration: one round or several?

The traditional pattern is **rounds**: 10–20 minutes of heat, then 5–15 minutes cooling off (outside air, a cool shower, or just sitting somewhere cooler), repeated one to three times. Much of the Finnish cohort data reflects total heat exposure of roughly 15–30 minutes per visit, and in those studies sessions of **more than ~19 minutes** were associated with better cardiovascular outcomes than sessions under 11 minutes — but that total can be split across rounds.

- **Round 1** — ease in, leave when you're sweating freely.
- **Cool-down** — rinse or rest until your breathing and heart rate settle.
- **Rounds 2–3** — usually where the deepest, most relaxing heat happens. Optional, not compulsory.

End any round early if you feel light-headed, your heart is racing uncomfortably, or you stop sweating. Those are exit signals, not challenges.

Frequency: how often per week?

This is the clearest signal in the literature. In the long-running Kuopio Ischaemic Heart Disease study of Finnish men, **2–3 sessions a week** was associated with meaningfully lower rates of cardiovascular events and all-cause mortality than one session a week, and **4–7 sessions** with lower rates again. These are observational associations in a population where sauna is a lifelong habit — they don't prove cause and effect — but the dose–response pattern is consistent across outcomes, including studies on blood pressure and memory-related disease.

A sensible progression

Weeks 1–2: two short sessions (one round each). Weeks 3–4: three sessions, adding a second round when it feels easy. From week 5: settle wherever between 3 and 7 sessions a week fits your life. Consistency over months matters more than any single heroic session.

Hot–cold contrast

Alternating sauna heat with deliberate cold — a cold shower, plunge barrel or ice bath — is a staple of Nordic practice. Users typically report a pronounced alertness and mood lift, consistent with the documented catecholamine response to cold-water immersion. A common structure:

- Sauna round (10–15 min) → cold water (30 seconds–2 minutes) → rest until warm → repeat 2–3 cycles.
- **Ending on cold** leaves most people alert — great for daytime. **Ending on heat** (with just a brief lukewarm rinse) is the gentler finish before bed.
- Enter cold water slowly and keep the first exposures short. Cold shock is real; work up over weeks.
- If your goal from a gym session is maximising muscle growth, note that some research suggests cold immersion in the hours immediately after strength training may blunt part of the adaptation signal — many lifters simply schedule the plunge away from training.

Anyone with a heart condition or uncontrolled blood pressure should get medical advice before adding cold immersion — the cold shock response is a significant cardiovascular stimulus.

Morning vs evening

Evening, 1–2 hours before bed: the strongest practical case. Body heating followed by the natural cool-down afterwards mirrors the core-temperature drop that precedes sleep, and research on passive body heating (warm baths and sauna) links this window with falling asleep faster and reported deeper sleep. Keep the last round moderate and skip the cold plunge.

Morning or midday: finishes you alert rather than sleepy, especially with a cold contrast at the end. There's no evidence one time of day is 'wasted' — pick the slot you'll actually keep.

Hydration and recovery

A vigorous session can cost **0.5–1 kg of sweat** — more in long or repeated rounds. Practical rules:

- Arrive hydrated; drink a glass of water before you start.
- Drink **500–750 ml of water per session**, sipped across rounds and afterwards — not skolled at the end.
- Sweat carries sodium and other electrolytes. After long or daily sessions, salt your food normally or add an electrolyte drink; plain water alone can leave you feeling flat after heavy sweating.
- Avoid alcohol entirely before and during sauna. It impairs heat tolerance and blood-pressure regulation and is the common factor in most serious sauna incidents.

- Eat lightly beforehand — a full stomach and 85 °C don't mix. Afterwards, a normal meal restores glycogen and fluid together.

Safety essentials

- Talk to your GP first if you're pregnant, have cardiovascular disease, low or high blood pressure that isn't well controlled, or take medications affecting sweating, hydration or heart rate.
- Supervise children closely; kids overheat faster than adults and should use shorter, cooler sessions.
- Remove jewellery and glasses (metal gets hot), sit on a towel, and hydrate between rounds.
- Dizziness, nausea, headache, or skin that has stopped sweating mean the session is over. Cool down, rehydrate, and keep the next session shorter.

Important: This guide is general information drawn from published research and established sauna practice. It is not medical advice and is not a substitute for advice from your doctor. Sauna use affects heart rate, blood pressure and hydration. If you are pregnant, have a heart or blood pressure condition, take medication that affects sweating or blood pressure, or have any other health concern, talk to your GP before starting. Stop any session immediately if you feel dizzy, nauseated or unwell. Never use a sauna after drinking alcohol, and never leave children unsupervised in or near a sauna.