

Ice baths are trending but those taking the dip must exercise caution as they can be dangerous

The Witness · 22 Oct 2025 · 6 · SAMUEL CORNELL and MICHAEL TIPTON FROM ROMAN TIMES TO TODAY WHAT DOES AN ICE BATH INVOLVE? WHAT ARE THE RISKS? SAFER RECREATIONAL ICE BATH USE • Samuel Cornell is a PhD candidate in public health, UNSW Sydney. • Michael Tipton is a professor of human and

Behind the marketing and influencer testimonials on podcasts and TikTok lies a less appealing truth. Ice baths can be dangerous. Walk through any trendy suburb and you might find a new “wellness” studio offering ice baths or “contrast therapy” (a sauna and ice bath combo). Scroll social media, and you’re likely to come across influencers preaching the cold plunge gospel with cult-like zeal.

Ice baths have gone mainstream. Initially practised mainly among high-performance athletes, cold water immersion is now a booming business, sold as recovery, discipline and therapy all in one, but the benefits are questionable and ice baths can have health risks.

Cold water immersion isn’t a new concept. The frigidarium — a room with a cold plunge pool or bath — was a feature in most Roman bathhouses.

For decades, athletes have used cold water immersion, such as swims in cold water, for recovery. But in recent years, with the proliferation of commercial cold plunge centres, there’s been an explosion in people using ice baths recreationally.

Many people are even setting up ice baths at home. The global cold plunge tub market was valued at close to \$338 million last year, and is projected to reach nearly \$483 million by 2033.

Social media shows serene influencers meditating through the pain, claiming it boosts mental health, serotonin, testosterone and their metabolism. But does the evidence stack up?

Ice baths can reduce muscle soreness after intense training but the effect is modest and short-lived. Some research shows cold water immersion can improve mood after a single exposure in young, healthy people, but other research doesn’t find these benefits. Most claims about mental health, testosterone and weight loss aren’t backed by strong evidence. Rather, they’re anecdotal and amplified by influencers.

At commercial establishments, patrons can often use the ice baths as they please during a session. Ice bath temperatures often range from 3°C to 15°C. There normally isn’t ice in the bath, but some people add it to their ice baths at home. Businesses offering ice baths don’t always monitor a person’s time in the ice bath. They may leave their customers to self-regulate, assuming they will know to get out of the water before they pass their body’s limits.

Cold water immersion triggers a powerful physiological response. When you hit cold water below 15°C, your body launches into cold shock. Gasping occurs and breathing becomes rapid and uncontrollable. Heart rate spikes. Blood pressure rises.

Staying in the water for too long can lead to hypothermia, a condition where a person’s core body temperature drops dangerously low. Shivering may begin within minutes in cold water. Confusion or fainting are more serious signs that hypothermia may be developing. Occasionally, this “cold shock” response can lead to a heart attack or stroke, especially if you have an undiagnosed condition affecting your heart, blood vessels or brain.

As far back as 1969, researchers found that even experienced swimmers could struggle after just a few minutes in cold water. Participants were immersed in water at 4,7°C while fully clothed and asked to swim as if trying to reach safety. Some developed serious respiratory distress and had to stop swimming within as little as 90 seconds, well before any measurable drop in core body temperature.

Even after you get out, your core temperature can continue to fall — a phenomenon known as afterdrop. So you can encounter problems, such as collapse, even after leaving the water. And even young, healthy people can be caught off guard. The body isn't designed to endure freezing water for extended periods.

Cold exposure can also cause long-term damage to nerves and blood vessels in the hands and feet, known as non-freezing cold injury. This is more likely if someone spends an extended period in cold water. Symptoms such as numbness, pain and sensitivity to cold can persist for years.

The ice bath trend is part of a broader wellness movement, promoted to young men in particular, where discomfort is repackaged as discipline.

But behind the hype lies a less appealing truth. Ice baths can be dangerous.

We advise caution, but if you do choose to try an ice bath, treat it seriously and follow these tips to reduce the risk of harm.

- Talk to a doctor: If you or your family have any heart, stroke or respiratory risk, skip it.
- Know your limits: Being fit doesn't protect you from cold shock.
- Start gradually: Begin with short warm to cold showers before full immersion.
- Never go alone: Especially if you're new to ice baths.
- Keep it short and watch the temperature: Limit sessions to three to five minutes and remember, problems can still occur after you get out.
- Recognise the signs of danger: Symptoms such as shivering, numbness and confusion are signs of hypothermia.

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