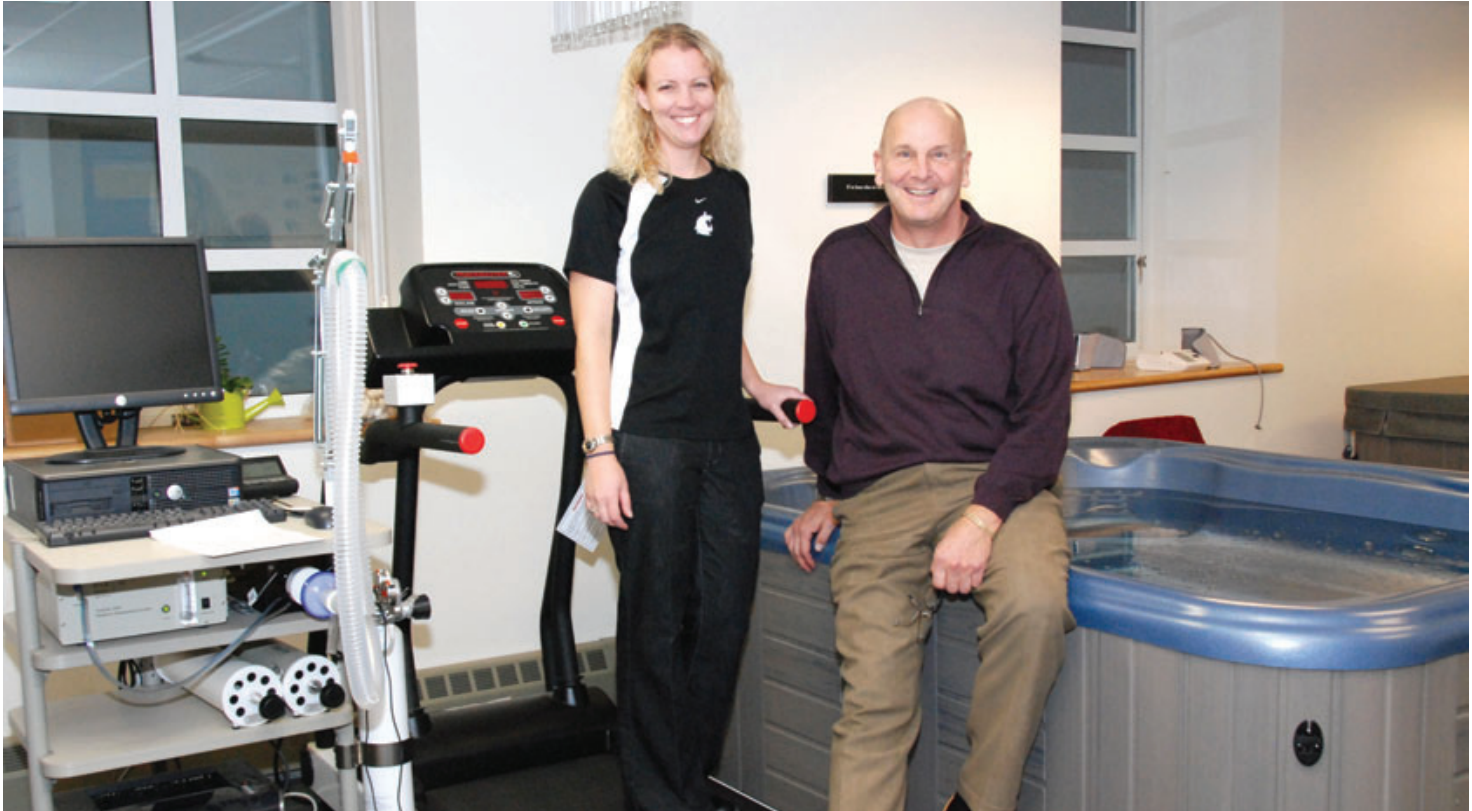


SAY AHHHHH...

Soaking in a hot tub not only feels good, it may be healthy, too

BY MICK LLOYD-OWEN



Researchers Dr. Kasee Hildebrand and Dr. Bruce Becker have spent the past two years with the tough job of studying the health effects of hot tubs. JULIE TITONE PHOTO/COURTESY OF WASHINGTON STATE UNIVERSITY

Humanity has long appreciated the luxurious “ahhhh” factor of a hot bath. The ancient Greeks and Romans built resplendent public bath houses, believing that beyond mere relaxation, the waters cured a wide variety of ills. So-called water-cures abound in the history of medicine, claiming to help ailments from pain to insomnia.

Aside from the obvious benefits of relaxation and temporary relief from bodily aches and pain — contested by no one — science is now investigating the physiology behind the mystery of warm-water immersion, hoping to fully understand its benefits and limitations.

“We spent the most important nine months of our lives immersed in a warm-water environment,” says Dr. Bruce Becker, a research professor at Washington State University. “It allowed the brain to grow, the bones to grow, the circulatory system to develop — and it did so in the most protective way possible. I suspect that wasn’t an accidental event,” he says.

Funded in part by a grant from the National Swimming Pool Foundation, Becker, his associate Dr.

Kasee Hildebrand and their team have completed two years of study on what happens to the human body in a hot tub.

“It really is incredibly profound,” Becker says. “Simply immersing in warm water to chest depth changes cardiac function in a way that virtually mimics aerobic exercise.” While he doubts that hydrotherapy is as effective as exercise in promoting overall fitness, the phenomenon is worth studying, according to Becker, since it may have implications for the treatment of disease. “Our current lifestyles are posing some potential challenges in terms of declining fitness, increasing obesity and increasing inactivity: There is an entire category of diseases labeled as ‘inactivity-related.’

“There is some basic science that shows that immersion does affect diabetes management in a positive way,” Becker continues. “It certainly allows people with bone and joint problems to exercise in a productive way.” The buoyancy of water suspends about 85 percent to 90 percent of the body’s weight, while at the same time relaxing muscles and increasing circulation. “We looked at circulatory function and showed that it dramatically improved in warm

water — 800-fold, basically.” More study remains to be done, however, to see if the same holds true for people with vascular impairments.

Doctors and therapists have long recommended hot tubs to ease arthritic and back pain. In fact, the IRS allows patients to write off the cost of a hot tub if they have a written recommendation from a doctor for a specific, debilitating condition such as arthritis. Needless to say, there are terms and conditions. (Those interested should Google IRS Publication 502 for details.) Some health insurance policies may also cover the costs of hot tubs installed for therapeutic purposes.

“I totally recommend them in addition to massage,” says massage therapist Christine Barranco, who practices at the DiBiasi Salon in Spokane. When someone soaks in a hot tub before a massage, “Their body is in a way better state to be worked on,” she says, noting that she can actually feel the difference in their body tissues with her hands. “In deep-tissue [massage], you want to get in, but if you go too deep too fast, you can damage the tissues,” she says. “If it’s more relaxed, you can get in there without doing damage.” ■