

Business Standard

Salt therapy for a variety of ailments is still in its early days in India

Salt Therapy is effective in increasing one's lung capacity, so it's good for athletes too, said Deepthi Babu, founder, Salt World

Nikita Puri January 18, 2019 Last Updated at 21:54 IST



SALTY SOLUTION

Salt therapy is quite popular in Europe, Australia and the US

are one of the two things stockpiled here; the other is salt for halotherapy. In Greek, “halo” is a prefix meaning salt, and a leaky nose, I’m assured, is all part of the long game when salt turns therapeutic.

The room looks like it’s covered in fresh snow, even the walls and the roof. Only, the white powder is salt. And as the sound of waves coming from the audio system becomes louder, it feels like a day at the beach, complete with a hint of saltiness on your lips.

Salt setups such as Babu’s use a halogenerator, a specialised piece of equipment that grinds up salt into superfine particles. You then breathe in the salt-rich air being pumped into a salt room.

The first order of business in Deepthi Babu’s health spa in Bengaluru is to slip on disposable footcovers and a shower cap. The next is to find yourself a spot among the comfy chairs next to a magazine stand or the shelf stacked with toys.

About 15 minutes into our conversation, as if pre-programmed to maximise embarrassment, my nose turns leaky. Tissues

Practitioners believe that this salt, taken through dry salt therapy (as opposed to, say gargling with salt water), cleans up your respiratory tracts and reaches the lungs, easing everything from asthma to congestion. The salt aerosol carries a negative electric charge that is believed to stimulate the respiratory system and help with stress, anxiety and also sleep patterns.

Today, halotherapy uses anti-inflammatory and anti-bacterial salt to provide relief in respiratory conditions such as bronchitis, sinusitis, cough (smoker's as well as chronic), allergies, cystic fibrosis as well as chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, better known as COPD. It's also believed to be effective in dealing with skin conditions such as eczema and psoriasis. "And, it's effective in increasing one's lung capacity, so it's good for athletes too," says Babu.

Bengaluru-based software professional Naveen Ranjan has been a regular at Babu's Salt World since it opened in 2017. "The sessions have really helped my 10-year-old daughter with her wheezing problems," says Ranjan. For Mumbai-based Jamsheed Mehta, it was rhinitis of over two decades that led him to salt therapy. "I was fed up of all the sneezing and the many courses of antibiotics. My doctor would tell me the only solution was to move out of Mumbai," he recalls.

After trying salt therapy in Delhi (at a now-defunct centre) and the UK, Mehta and his wife, Lyla, opened Salt Escape in Mumbai in 2015. "Besides the fact that I had personally seen it help, another trigger for setting this up was when a friend's kid had to be rushed to the hospital in the middle of the night because of asthma," says Mehta.

"Salt therapy," he adds, "is not a substitute for allopathy, but an alternative therapy that can make existing treatments more effective."



Health spas and wellness clinics across the globe are increasingly adding salt-covered rooms to their list of offerings. And so are upscale residential buildings in New York, Chicago and Florida. Closer home, between its three independent centres and another one attached to a hospital (Svastha in Whitefield), Bengaluru-

based RespiCare has treated over 4,000 patients.

"Salt therapy is quite popular in Europe, Australia and the US for its effectiveness in helping with a number of respiratory and skin conditions, besides its immune-boosting properties," says Sathish Rao, director at RespiCare. "However, in India, only a small section of people who are concerned about the ill-effects of over-medication accept the concept."

Allergy specialist Pradeep Waghmare, who runs Salt Cave Asia in Pune, says the therapy helps detoxify lungs, and the salt also acts as a natural exfoliator and help's the skin's regenerative process. One should note that it isn't the iodine-infused table salt that these centres use. They use either pharmaceutical-grade salt or sea salt.

A halotherapy session ideally lasts for about an hour, and one needs multiple sessions to get long-term relief. While children with allergies make up a bulk of the clientele in India, people in their 90s also come to Mehta's Salt Escape. A single session cost about Rs 1,400 on average, but these centres also offer a plethora of packages — such as annual subscriptions that allow for unlimited seatings and monthly deals that can bring costs down to Rs 700 per session.

Salt therapy has been around for ages. Back in 1843, Polish physician Feliks Boczkowski noticed that salt mine workers did not suffer from any respiratory or lung ailments, unlike workers at other mines. Almost a century later, German physician Karl Hermann Spannagel observed that his patients who had taken refuge in salt caves during heavy bombing in World War II were doing better.

There is, however, little clinical evidence of the effectiveness of salt therapy in India. The limited research that summarises the benefits of halotherapy largely comes from Europe.

“There may be a placebo effect or a feel-good factor involved here, something like the relief that comes after steam inhalation,” says George D'Souza, pulmonologist and dean at Bengaluru-based St John's Medical College. “We really can't be sure since there's not much published medical research to back it. But there doesn't seem to be any harm in it.”

The therapy is considered safe for those suffering from high blood pressure since the salt, when inhaled, doesn't mix with the blood stream. Besides, the amount of salt inhaled is always much less than our average salt intake, says Waghmare of Salt Cave Asia.



Deepthi Babu, founder, Salt World

untapped,” she says.

Back in Bengaluru's Salt World, white particles have found their way onto my dark clothes and the brush kept at the doorway suddenly seems to make sense.

Babu, meanwhile, has already wrapped up a halite yoga session in the salt room. She's also had companies hold meetings here. “The potential of salt rooms is

You'll also find these centres stocked with packets and boxes of bath salts (Epsom) and Himalayan salt lamps. Contrary to their name, these salt rocks that are converted into lamps largely come from the Khewra salt mines of Pakistan. While the lamps, which come in shades of pink, orange and red, are used for colour therapy, contrary to claims, there's no evidence to back their air-purification properties. "I really don't think these lamps are strong enough to purify the air, but they definitely make you feel good because of their warm glow," says Babu.

Also up for grabs are large, pink slabs of salt that you can cook on (hot stone cooking). Incredibly dense, these are primarily used for slow-cooking and are known for the subtle saltiness and flavour they impart to everything from meat to vegetables. These blocks are sturdy and can be placed directly over the stove or even on charcoal grills, as long as they aren't heated too quickly. Mined from large salt boulders and shaped into slabs, these make for intriguing presentations.

Clearly there's a world of salt out there.