

# Weight-Loss Sauna Promises Big Results

By Richard J. Wolff, RD, LDN

In the fitness industry, the promise of weight loss can generate big bucks. In response to this growing opportunity, more fitness centers are offering weight-loss products and services. The unfortunate part of this trend is that many of these products and services are ineffective, and sometimes dangerous. On its consumer education web site, the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) warns consumers to avoid programs and products that promise results with no effort. Despite these strong recommendations, some fitness centers still make false promises.

An example of one of these false promises comes from a local fitness center. Ads from this fitness center promote a weight-loss sauna that claims to have revolutionary technology. They claim a single session in their sauna will burn up to 800 calories.

Impressed by these claims, I decided to contact the fitness center promoting this revolutionary sauna. When I asked, “*How do you burn 800 calories while sitting in a sauna?*” the employee I spoke with said she had researched the sauna on the internet. Her research led her to believe that sweating meant you were burning calories. Unfortunately, her research is incorrect.

According to Guyton’s textbook of medical physiology, “as water evaporates from the body surface, 0.58 calories of heat are lost for each gram of water that evaporates.” However, losing heat through the evaporation of sweat does not mean that your body is burning calories. Sweating (losing heat) in a sauna occurs because your body has absorbed heat from the sauna. This process is called thermoregulation. Thermoregulation prevents heat illness by regulating body temperature. Thermoregulation and the break-down of chemical energy (burning calories) are two separate processes that are not directly related.

According to Walter Thompson, Ph.D., professor of exercise science at Georgia State University, “Sweating is the way your body cools itself. Post-exercise weight loss often represents a loss of fluids from the body, not a reduction in body fat.” In their highly acclaimed book, *The Fat-Free Truth*, fitness authors Liz Neporent and Suzanne Schlosberg warn readers not to confuse sweating with burning calories.

If burning 800 calories while sitting in a sauna were possible, exercise would become obsolete. Physical activity guidelines from federal health agencies could be met while sitting in a sauna. If you overate, you could simply spend a few minutes in the sauna to balance off the extra calories. This kind of flawed thinking goes against established laws

of physics and exercise science. Losing body fat requires effort. This no-effort approach to weight management is exactly what the FTC warns against.

There is no scientific evidence indicating that sweating in a sauna leads to fat loss. In fact, the best evidence on weight loss indicates just the opposite. The Clinical Guidelines for Weight Loss and Weight Maintenance published by the National Institutes of Health (NIH) provide clear evidence on what works for weight loss and weight loss maintenance. A summary of these guidelines was published in the *Journal of Obesity Research*. This comprehensive report was created by a panel of 24 members who are experts in medicine, clinical nutrition, exercise physiology and psychology. The report reviewed evidence from nearly 400 published studies and concluded that successful weight management is best achieved by participating in programs that focus on diet therapy, physical activity, and behavioral therapy. The NIH report does not mention or recommend the use of saunas for weight management!

You may be wondering how a fitness center can get away with such bold claims. Unfortunately, there are few *standards of practice* within the fitness industry. Advertising often means say what you want. The vast majority of claims go unchallenged. To help combat this problem, the FTC has implemented *Operation Big Fat Lie*. More information is available in a brochure called *Weighing the Evidence in Diet Ads* at [www.ftc.gov/dietfit](http://www.ftc.gov/dietfit).

The best way to prevent health fraud is to become an informed consumer. Continue to learn, ask questions and always keep your thinking cap on. When it comes to this local fitness center, the owners either don't know any better or don't care. In either case their actions should not be tolerated!