

Possibilities and Perspectives of Modern SPA Therapies for Developing a Healthy Lifestyle

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Abstract: This article draws attention to the possibilities of applying modern spa therapies in order to reduce the risk of socially significant diseases, perspectives for the development of wellness education and future research. The results of recent studies on the effectiveness of spa and wellness programs in influencing psycho-emotional state, overweight, cellulite and health in users of these services are analyzed.

Keywords: spa therapies, certified spa and wellness centres, wellness, education.



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INTRODUCTION

Medicus curat, Natura sanat.

Hippocrates, c. 460-377 BC

I. HEALTH STATUS OF THE BULGARIAN

There is a trend of ageing population in the European Union (EU) countries and Bulgaria is no exception. According to Eurostat (2021), Bulgaria is ranked first among the EU member states with the highest overall mortality rate (21.7 per thousand) compared to the average for the EU (11.9 per thousand). Compared to the average life expectancy in the EU (80.1 years), the estimated average life expectancy in Bulgaria is lower.

The National Health Risk Factor Survey (2020) of Bulgarians shows: *insufficient physical activity; deficit of health education information; poor nutritional status; high levels of daily stress.*

The worsened health of the Bulgarians, the high morbidity and mortality rates, the reduced life expectancy place ever more demanding requirements on the healthcare system. These trends require the search for new alternatives to improve health and quality of life. In this sense, spa and wellness practices offer effective coping strategies, such as health risk prevention.

Fortunately, we live in a country with abundant nature. Bulgaria is among the first countries in Europe in the variety and richness of hydrothermal waters and resorts with balneo-climatic treatment.

II. POSSIBILITIES OF SPA THERAPIES FOR IMPROVING THE HEALTH STATUS OF THE BULGARIANS

From a medical point of view, spa therapies are considered as complex health and/or aesthetic programs for restoring the physical, mental and psychological health and beauty of a person, using natural healing resources or their artificial analogues in combination with psychotherapeutic methods. Spa methods are pleasant, non-invasive, painless; they provide increased comfort to the client through additional impact on the senses of sight (natural landscapes), hearing (composition of sounds and silence, music), smell (aromatherapy), touch (warm, cold, tactile impact), taste (herbal and detox teas, fresh, etc.). They can have different durations (1, 3, 5/10 days).

Depending on their **goals**, spa therapies are aimed at **detoxification** of the body, **relaxation** of the nervous system, **anti-cellulite** and **figure re-modelling** effect, **revitalizing** and **slowing aging** effect, **analgesic** and **prophylactic** effect when included and Medical Spa sector (courses of more procedures).

Scientific research on the effects of different spa treatments and spa programmes, both in the short and long term, is still lacking.

II. 1. AIM

Analyzing the results of some of the latest studies on the effectiveness of spa therapies aimed at influencing **stress**, **weight reduction** and **cellulite**. The presented scientific evidence

should be compared with the results of our own research in the field of the scientific subject.

II.2 RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

II.2.1. Anti-stress and relax SPA therapies

Spa therapies provide an opportunity to improve both the physical, emotional and mental adaptation of the body. The most frequently offered relaxing procedures are different types of **massages** – relaxing, aromatherapeutic, reflex, hydro massage with mineral or fresh water; **masks** – hydrating, cleansing, revitalizing; **heat-treatment procedures** – Finnish and infrared sauna, steam bath, laconium, tepidarium, Turkish bath; **water procedures** – baths, showers, baths, bathing in a mineral pool; **aeration and heliotherapy**.

II.2.1.1. Massage therapy

In the last two decades, there has been an increased interest in massage therapy for spa and wellness prevention of various diseases. Research has shown that massage therapy positively affects anxiety^{1,2}; depression³; pain⁴; stress⁵ and improves quality of life^{6,7}.

Spa package 'Anti-stress' (aromatherapy massage; hydro massage bath with warm mineral water; full body mask with pure chocolate; underwater shower massage, relaxing massage (with a background of quiet music and aromatic candles) is applied to 45 persons (18 men and 27 women) with the possibility of additional use of the sauna park (Finnish and infrared sauna, laconium, tepidarium, steam bath with mint and eucalyptus, relaxation room, ice fountain and ice pool).

The SAN test applied to the examined persons showed a positive attitude in 85 % with an improvement in a number of indicators (feeling of freshness; feeling of burst of strength; better self-esteem; satisfaction; good mood)⁸.

¹ Bauer et al. 2010: 70-75.

² Andonova 2014c: 103-107.

³ Moyer 2008: 3-5.

⁴ Marinova 2019: 581-585.

⁵ Nikolovska et al. 2012: 694-697.

⁶ Wändell et al. 2012: 8-15.

⁷ Marinova 2018: 205-213.

⁸ Pavlova et al. 2016: 336-341.



Picture 1. Relaxing massage.



Picture 2. Point massage.

There is still a lack of studies in Bulgaria investigating the impact of combined physical and mental relaxation methods.

The combined effects of anti-stress massage and an individual combination of Dr. Bach's flower essences were applied to 57 individuals (43 women and 14 men) aged 20 to 50 years. There was also an increased interest in relaxation treatments in males, as a health prevention option; the combined effects attracted people of active working age (40-50 years), with the likely cause being accumulated higher stress levels on one hand and better financial opportunities on the other. 65% of respondents would repeat the treatments⁹ (Fig. 1).

The combined impact of the relaxing massage and Dr. Bach's anti-stress elixir provides deeper psychophysical relaxation.



Picture3. Bach elixirs.

Analysis of recent research data shows an expansion of the therapeutic uses of rose oil by demonstrating a number of its pharmacological effects: antioxidant and antiviral (herpes virus); analgesic, anxiety and depression reducing; antimicrobial; bronchodilator and antitussive effects; anti-inflammatory; antidiabetic; laxative and anti-aging effects^{10,11}. Certified spa and wellness centres in the country, where there is a comprehensiveness of digital presentability of services, have developed special aromatherapy rituals. The average number of aromatherapy treatments is approximately between four for wellness centres and six for SPA centres¹².

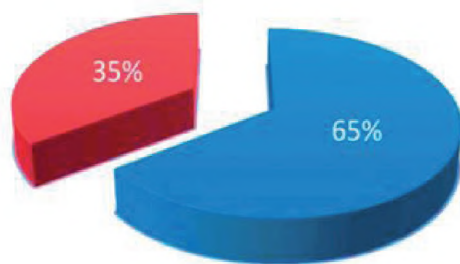


Figure 1. Respondents' preference for repeating the procedure.

II.2.1.2. MODERATE ANTI-STRESS PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

In recent years, there has been an increased interest in **moderate physical anti-stress activities** such as yoga, tai-chi, qigong, sacred architecture, paneurythmy, eurythmy and others. These are practices aimed at restoring the balance between mind and body, between

⁹ Angelcheva, Petkova 2019: 348-352.

¹⁰ Popova-Dobreva 2023: 74-81.

¹¹ Popova-Dobreva, Gencheva 2012: 135-141.

¹² Popova-Dobreva 2022: 98-103.

the spiritual and the physical in the human personality, in which the client actively and consciously participates in stimulating his or her own healing mechanisms.

Clinical evidences are presented for the use of *yogic breathing* in the treatment of *depression, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder, as well as for the treatment of victims who have experienced mass disasters*, as the yoga system enables to *increase the body's resilience against stress. to improve well-being, mood, attention, intellectual focus, and stress tolerance* by increasing parasympathetic tone and calming stress response systems via neuroendocrine pathways¹³.



Picture 4. Yoga practice.

The study of 76 women (42 yoga practitioners and 34 physically inactive) showed that the **leading coping strategies** for women who *do not play sports are passive*; they have more difficulty solving their problems in stressful situations and become frustrated. *For women practicing yoga, the leading strategies are active*. The studied individuals react immediately in stressful situations, concentrate on the problem and actively deal with it¹⁴.

II.2.1.3. BALNEOTHERAPY

Five-month hot mineral water spa therapy in 500 clinically healthy volunteers, showed significant relief of complaints related to sleep disturbance; mental stress and general health problems; joint pain, leg or foot cramps; blurred vision in subjects in the experimental group compared to the control group; significant

reduction in waist circumference in women under 55 in the experimental group¹⁵.

II.2.2. SPA TREATMENTS FOR CELLULITE REDUCTION.

Successful spa treatments for cellulite reduction require: long-term complex application of an appropriate diet and exercise regime, combined with an individual approach to treating problem areas. The orientation of consumers towards an environmentally friendly healthy lifestyle in recent years has made natural products more and more preferred as anti-cellulite, remodelling and detox treatments: honey, chocolate, essential oils, seaweed, milk, wine and others.

Anti-cellulite massage with honey was applied to 20 women (25-35 years, 10 treatments of 30 minutes, twice a week) with 2-5 drops of suitable essential oils in individual combinations (grapefruit, orange, lemon, lavender, juniper, rosemary, sage, geranium, etc.). Statistically significant reductions were reported for all measured circumferences. Combined with thermo-zone treatments, honey therapies are a very good detoxifying and revitalizing procedure¹⁶.

The analysis of the exported Internet information in the digital applications of the certified centres in Bulgaria shows that honey treatments occupy a significant place in Bulgarian SPA-centres and are less present in wellness centres and massage studios in Sofia. It is noticeable that there is a tendency to develop and apply both independent and combined rituals and concepts based on the use of Bulgarian products – honey, wine, milk, rose oil and herbs¹⁷.

Apparatus methods for aesthetic correction and remodeling of the figure, based on reshaped physical factors: *ultrasonic cavitation; pressotherapy; radiofrequency lifting; exercises on a vibrating platform* were included in a 3-month program of figure modelling in 45 overweight

¹³ Brown's, Gerbarg 2005b: 711–717.

¹⁴ Marinov et al. 2017: 57-63.

¹⁵ Bei Yang et al. 2017: 261-272.

¹⁶ Tomova 2022: 88-93.

¹⁷ Angelcheva, Tomova 2023: 66-73.

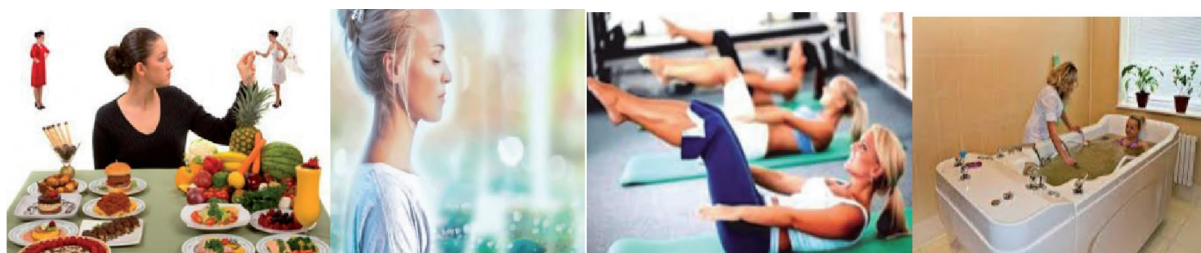
women with cellulite (second degree), aged 34-45 years. The combination of *diet* and *aesthetic physiotherapy* applied to the studied individuals showed a statistically significant reduction of their BMI to the healthy norm (BMI below 25)¹⁸.

II.2.3. SPA THERAPIES FOR WEIGHT REDUCTION

Spa therapy combined with **practical workshops** is **more effective** in weight loss programs for obesity at a young age and for metabolic syndrome in adults. A two-week author's complex spa program (appropriate diet and exercise regimen, anti-cellulite and underwater-shower massage, relaxation techniques and healthy lifestyle discussions) applied to 25 clinically healthy pre- or post-menopausal women (40-50 years) had a positive effect not only on weight reduction but also on the level of mental well-being in the studied individuals¹⁹.

Comparable in design to our study is a prospective controlled study conducted at a center (the thermal facility of Bryd le-Bain, France) with 340 obese and overweight volunteers enrolled and divided into two groups. The study monitored the long-term effects of a standard weight loss spa therapy (intake of 600 ml of mineral water; individual baths, showers and underwater massages, consultation with a nutritionist, a practical nutrition workshop, physical activity with or without a trainer) applied alone and in combination with a therapeutic education program to the studied individuals. The results showed that while Spa therapy carried out alone led to weight reduction, increased physical activity and improved quality of life, the inclusion of therapeutic training increased the durability of these effects²⁰.

Few studies have examined the effects of aqua practice in overweight women. The application of a 6-month adapted aqua



Picture 5. Elements of a complex weight reduction program.

gymnastics program in obese women, combined with underwater-jet massage of problem areas, showed statistically significant weight reduction and improved psycho-emotional tone, compared to the change in these indicators in the group with massage procedure applied alone²¹.

Similar results were reported in a three-month study of women (up to 30 years of age) involving twice-weekly attendance at an aqua spinning program, combined with underwater

shower massage of problem areas, compared to those in the massage-only group²².

Such adapted programs have proven their effect in maintaining a healthy weight and good psycho-emotional tone also during pregnancy in healthy women²³.

Stress and obesity are mutually determined conditions whose biological relationship has been established by the disturbances of the levels of the main hormones regulating appetite²⁴.

Modern trends require Spa practices to

¹⁸ Nikolovska 2013: 188-191.

¹⁹ Angelcheva 2023: 556-560.

²⁰ Schnebelen-Berthier et al. 2019: 492-498.

²¹ Aleksandrova 2019: 49-53.

²² Trendafilov, Dimitrova 2013: 454-460.

²³ Nesheva 2015: 210-214.

²⁴ Haleem 2014: 384-97.

include both treatments and techniques aimed at influencing metabolism and reducing the effects of stress.

A scientific project has been developed to demonstrate the effectiveness of these practices by assessing heart rate variability, methods to assess cardiac re-modelling and function, electrodermal activity, blood markers, anthropometric profile, body mass composition, bone parameters, psychological assessment²⁵. The Obesi Stress Protocol offers a new Spa program to manage stress in addition to the procedures to influence obesity in the thermal zone.

II. 3. DISCUSSION

The accumulated global and Bulgarian experience shows that there is a need for more research aimed at proving the effectiveness of combined Spa programs for stress management in overweight and obesity.

II. 4. OUTCOMES

Developing successful strategies to deal with everyday stress, overweight and obesity as an element of modern lifestyles through the integration of practices in Spa and Wellness culture would have significant benefits as health risk prevention. This in turn requires the

need for continuous and ongoing training of qualified personnel to respond to the challenges in this rapidly evolving field.

II. 5. RECOMMENDATIONS

1. For the purposes of research in the field of spa and wellness practices in our country, it is necessary to introduce tools for evaluation and documentation of the obtained databases of the results of the analysis of experiments not only at the end of the therapeutic course, but also with the possibility of long-term follow-up

2. This research can serve as a basis for the design of new, more effective Spa and Wellness products and programs, combining both new and non-traditional methods for the prevention of risk factors of socially significant diseases.

III. CONCLUSION

The holistic approach is the key to the future of SPA and Wellness Centres as a serious institution for health prevention. Incorporating therapeutic programs with educational objectives to be conducted within the Spa and Wellness treatment course will enable the current passive client to transform from a mere consumer into an active creator of their own health and well-being.

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Възможности и перспективи на съвременните спа терапии за изграждане на здравословен стил на живот

Мариана Ангелчева

Настоящото проучване се фокусира върху възможностите на съвременните СПА и Уелнес програми за повлияване на стрес, редукия на наднормено тегло и целулит при потребителите на тези услуги. Очертани са основните насоки за развитие и необходимостта от бъдещи научни изследвания относно ефективността и качеството на СПА практиките и предлаганите програми. Особен акцент се поставя върху необходимостта от включването на здравно-образователни програми, насочени към промяна в начина на живот чрез създаване на трайни навици за здравословно хранене, физическа активност и стил на живот, в рамките на престоя в СПА и Уелнес центрите.

