

Japanese Bathing Habits as a Hidden Healthcare System

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Abstract

A distinctive health determinant for Japanese people is related to bathing. Japanese people incorporate bathing into various aspects of their lives. In particular, bathing is actively incorporated into the following three situations: 1) Daily Bathing Habits: Household rituals for hygiene and health, 2) Onsen (Hot Springs): A major leisure activity and form of relaxation, 3) Bathing in Long-term Care: Home-visit bathing and facility-based (day service) bathing. These three are common and significant characteristics of many Japanese people. Based on these points, the Japanese bathing habit can be described as a hidden healthcare system for maintaining and improving health.

Introduction

While Japan maintains one of the highest life expectancies globally and excels in the WHO's 'Healthy Life Expectancy (HALE)' index, various factors like diet, exercise, and social connections play a role. Among these, the daily habit of bathing is particularly unique. Through the therapeutic effects of warm water, which promotes circulation and relaxation, bathing has become an essential part of the healthy Japanese lifestyle.

Bathing in Japan encompasses a wide range of activities: from daily household routines and professional services like home-visit or day-service bathing under Long-term Care Insurance, to visiting hot springs as a primary leisure activity. In other words, the importance of bathing is deeply integrated into Japanese society, and featured in daily habits, professional care services provided at home or facilities, and the popularity of hot springs as a leading form of recreation.

Daily Bathing Habits: Household rituals for hygiene and health

According to OECD statistics, the average healthy life expectancy for Japanese people was 84.1 years, which is 3.0 years above the OECD countries average. In Japan, a system is in place that ensures all citizens have access to basic medical services, and this is well-known globally as a major factor contributing to the country's long average life expectancy [1]. On the other

hand, the WHO's Healthy Life Expectancy (HALE) is an important indicator for evaluating the health status of each country. HALE comprehensively measures the health status of a population by integrating both average life expectancy and quality of life, and Japan's HALE is 73.4 years, placing it among the world's top countries [2].

While healthcare systems, including medical care, are crucial for extending average life expectancy, extending healthy life expectancy depends on people's daily health behaviors. Healthy behaviors are influenced by people's values and depend on individual awareness and actions; in fact, this can be considered "a hidden healthcare system." The daily bathing habit of Japanese people is not merely about washing, but also about relieving fatigue throughout the body by soaking up to the shoulders in the bathtub. This is also done with the expectation of the warming effect of the bath, which is achieved through the use of bath salts, and the relaxation effect of the entire body through buoyancy.

Onsen (Hot Springs)-A major leisure activity and form of relaxation

It is well known that Japan is one of the world's leading nations for hot springs; Table 1 shows data on hot spring usage in Japan, as published by the Ministry of the Environment [3]. As shown in Table 1, although the number of hot spring resorts has decreased

slightly, both the number of accommodation facilities and the total annual number of overnight guests have increased. In particular, the annual number of overnight stays exceeds 100 million; while

this figure includes repeat visitors and guests from overseas, the results suggest that almost of Japanese people make use of these services (Table 1).

Table 1: Hot Spring Usage Status (FY 2023,2024).

Year	Number of Hot Spring Resorts	Number of overnight for Number of Accommodation Facilities the fiscal year
2023	2857	13179
2024	2839	13426

Taking these realities into account, the government decided to nominate “hot spring culture” for inscription on the UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage list and to submit the nomination proposal to the secretariat [4]. An outline of the specific proposal is as follows.

“Hot spring culture” is a social custom deeply rooted in the Japanese people—the practice of soaking in hot springs, a gift of nature, to heal both mind and body. Traditional bathing methods that harness the natural environment were developed, and people have long enjoyed the benefits of hot springs, including the practice of ‘toji’ (therapeutic bathing).

From the above, it is evident that hot spring culture has played a significant role in maintaining and promoting the health of the Japanese people.

Bathing in Long-term Care: Home-visit bathing

In Japan, the public Long-Term Care Insurance system (LTCI) (‘Kaigo Hoken’) was launched in 2000 in response to the aging of the population [5]. Under Japan’s public Long-Term Care Insurance system (LTCI), the costs for individual services are standardized by the government as “long-term care service fees,” with the cost for each service determined in advance. The long-term care service fees system is structured to be revised every three years. The system for providing end-of-life care in home-visit bathing services has been evaluated, and it has been decided that an additional fee will be applied in 2021 [6]. Efforts to enhance end-of-life care support include the provision of home-visit bathing services during the end-of-life phase of home-visit care, as well as ensuring bathing opportunities for users who have difficulty traveling to day-care facilities. Furthermore, under Japan’s Long-Term Care Insurance system (LTCI), the “preventive home-visit bathing service” allows for the provision of bathing services using a portable bathtub to users who do not have a bathtub in their homes. As outlined above, in Japan, bathing is considered extremely important for maintaining the cleanliness and improving the quality of life of individuals requiring long-term care.

On the Benefits of Bathing

Regarding the effects of bathing—specifically soaking in a bathtub—various effects can be considered beyond the cleansing action provided by showering; generally, these include (1) thermal effects, (2) hydrostatic pressure, and (3) buoyancy. Furthermore,

in the case of hot spring baths, additional benefits derived from the specific components of the spring water can be expected. In addition to these, various relaxing effects can be expected. A great deal of knowledge has already been gained regarding the various effects that each of these effects exerts on the living body and Balneotherapy physicians are certified [7,8]. Potential downsides include rise in blood pressure and physical strain caused by the bathwater temperature. Additionally, there is a risk of falling when standing up, and elderly individuals often require assistance. But In Japan, the term “hot spring hospital” is sometimes used by hospitals that feature on-site natural hot spring facilities—utilizing the water for balneotherapy (such as bathing or drinking) and rehabilitation—or by hospitals located in hot spring areas; however, there is no official definition for this term under the Medical Care Act, and such hospitals are few in number.

Conclusion

According to AHRQ (Agency for Health Research and Quality, Self-management support is meant the help given to people with chronic conditions that enables them to manage their health on a day-to-day basis. And it is said self-management support can help and inspire people to learn more about their conditions and to take an active role in their health care [9]. It is suggested that the Japanese contribute to extending their healthy lifespan by engaging in self-care through daily bathing habits and the use of hot springs as a leisure activity, such as recovering from chronic fatigue and improving chronic lower back pain or stiff shoulders. Even in terminal cases requiring care, the Japanese culture of aiming to improve quality of life through bathing is noteworthy. While further evidence needs to be gathered, it appears necessary to examine the relationship between bathing habits and health not only in Japan but also in other countries.

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