




## WHEN AND HOW TO BATHE

By Cyrus Edson, M. D.

Ex-President of the New York Board of Health



It is within all our memories when water was considered the fashionable cure-all, but like all the cure-alls it has had its day. A new medicine, a new treatment, a new operation is discovered, and the medical, as well as the lay, world runs wild over it. Then, when it fails to do all that has been promised, it is discarded, and as a rule its real value is entirely overlooked and set at naught.

As the human race, so far as we know, attained civilization earliest in tropical countries, so the bath obtained there a development never exceeded even in ancient times. The hot room, the douche, the massage were apparently known among the people of Babylon, but we have no means of finding out whether or not they originated there. The baths of Rome were more magnificent than anything seen in modern times. When the Arabs from the desert, with the Koran in one hand and the scimeter in the other, swept out the remains of the fallen Lower Empire they retained the bath in all its magnificence. "The Book of the Thousand Nights and One Night," as translated by Sir Richard Burton, gives us pictures of the bath we would find it impossible to equal to-day. Not only was the bath a means of luxury in those days, but its hygienic value was known and appreciated. Many Roman authors allude to its curative powers, and it is evident that the effects derived from it were properly estimated.

PRIMARILY speaking, the first and most important hygienic effect of the bath in health is cleanliness. In these days of diffused knowledge all men and women know that the skin contains millions of little orifices called pores, which serve as minute drain pipes, through which a part of the waste of the body escapes. When a person is suffering from that familiar ailment, a cold, these pores are closed, and the extra work thrown on other organs of secretion become at once disagreeably apparent. Now, when the skin is unclean the pores are mechanically closed, very much as a bottle is closed when it is corked. The bath, figuratively speaking, removes the cork. More than this, the bath removes the dead particles of the scurf or outer skin which have also mechanically closed the pores. The vigorous rubbing, which should be a part of all baths, stimulates the minute blood vessels as well as the nerves of the skin. A person who bathes frequently has a much more sensitive skin than one who does not. I do not mean sensitive to cold, although there are people who make this mistake. As a matter of fact, a healthy skin is like a healthy body: it is far less liable to contract disease.

It is impossible to give any rule about bathing which will apply to all persons. Each in this must be a law unto himself. In nothing does the desire, so common among mankind, to have others conform to the rule of life adopted by one's self, so often show itself as in the advice given on the subject of baths. You hear some strong man, who delights in the bracing shock of cold water when he rises from his warm bed, not only dilate on the value of the bath taken as he takes it, but seriously advising others to adopt his rule—those others, be it understood, being persons who could not possibly stand the shock of a cold bath. Again, you will hear a man who resorts to the Turkish bath three or four times a week, and derives great benefit therefrom, urge his friend to follow his example, when such a system of bathing would probably prostrate the friend.

The number and temperature of the baths, when they are taken merely for the purpose of cleanliness, must be regulated by the personal feelings of the bather. It may, however, be said that every one can take baths in some form, and emphatically every one should.

It is quite possible to give certain general directions about baths which will meet the requirements of the majority of persons in good health. A child between the ages of one and ten years—the bathing of infants is fairly well understood by mothers and nurses, and as it almost invariably is the subject of the directions given by the family physician, it need not be considered here—should be bathed in a tub once a week, the temperature of the water being about ninety degrees Fahrenheit. A little ammonia may be added to the water to aid as a stimulant to the skin.

THE water in the tub should be from four to six inches deep. It sometimes happens that very young children seem to be afraid of the water, in which case it is not worth while to force them into the bath. A good sponging will serve until they outgrow the fear. Good Castile soap is the best to use.

Children under five years of age should have all surfaces liable to chafe, as well as the armpits, powdered with lycopodium or good, unscented starch powder. This should always be applied before putting them in bed.

From the ages of ten to fifteen years children should not bathe more than twice a week (though, of course, a sponge bath should be taken every day). Once a week is sufficient for cleanliness, less than this is not. As before, the temperature of the water should be ninety degrees Fahrenheit. The best time for the bath is just before going to bed, although this is not obligatory. If taken at any other time it should be followed by a cold shower.

From sixteen to twenty-two years the baths for cleanliness are the same. A tub bath, with the water between sixty and seventy degrees Fahrenheit, may be taken every other day on rising from bed, and if the person be in very robust health, and he or she like this bath, it may be taken daily. In place of it a shower bath for two or three minutes, with the water at sixty degrees Fahrenheit, may be substituted. When this is the practice the tub bath, at ninety degrees Fahrenheit, should never be taken more than once in seven days, and then at bedtime followed by a cool shower. These rules apply to all adults in good health until the first effects of age become apparent.

THE hygienic value of the bath in cases of disease is very great, but as the water is then used as a medicine—that is, as a part of the treatment—its use must be prescribed by a physician. A sick person has no more right to take a bath without the order of a medical man than he has to change his medicine. But there is a border line between health and disease, where people prescribe for themselves, and here the bath may be used rightly enough without orders. For example, suppose a person be tired out by overwork of any kind, to feel nervous, irritable and worn, to be absolutely certain that bed means only tossing for hours in an unhappy wakefulness. We all know this condition of the body and mind. Turn on the hot water in the bathroom and soak in the hot bath until the drowsy feeling comes, which will be within three minutes; rub yourself briskly with a coarse Turkish towel until the body is perfectly dry, and then go to bed. You will sleep the sleep of the just, and rise in the morning wondering how you could have felt so badly the night before. The bath has saved many a one from a sleepless night, if not from a severe headache the next day.

THE use of cold water, or rather the therapeutic effect of cold water, on the skin, is that of shock, and the effect of this, again, is to stimulate the organs subjected to it, and, secondarily, all those of the body. Any person who has ever felt the cold douche knows that when it strikes the body one fairly gasps for breath. Immediately afterward there is a tingling feeling in the nerves of the skin and one of warmth, owing to the increased action of the heart. This means the nerves and the heart have been stimulated. When, then, we find a girl who is anæmic, whose skin is cold, whose movements are languid, and in whom life seems to be feeble, we can do great things with her by utilizing the stimulating shock of cold water. Not the douche, because that would be too strong and the effect too great, but she can stand in the bath and have a basin of cold water poured on the shoulders. Then she must be vigorously rubbed. Treatment of this kind depends for its value in the shock, but if continued it will have the greatest effect. Its value is not confined to anæmic girls. Men whose work is sedentary and who have little time to follow those pursuits which will stimulate the heart and lungs, or women who have little chance to exercise, can find in cold water very great benefit. It must be used as a douche or by means of the ordinary shower bath. A word of caution in regard to its use should be remembered. A cold douche or any form of shower bath should not be used when a person is tired or exhausted from any cause, as the reaction, on which the shock depends for its beneficial effect, does not follow effectually when the system is tired.

THE result of the shower in such a case is apt to be internal congestion, which may be disastrous. It does not follow, however, that a perspiring person should not bathe until cooled off. As a matter of fact, if the person is not exhausted the fact that the pores are open is rather advantageous than otherwise, as the reaction is enhanced and will probably follow more energetically. A bath should never be taken within two hours of a hearty meal. The first effect of immersion in warm or in cold water is to seriously derange the digestive process if that is progressing at the time, and by a physiological effect that naturally follows, to unbalance or derange the whole nervous system. The result of this is extremely dangerous to the bather. There are numerous instances of severe illness and even of death caused by bathing while the stomach was full.

Few people have any idea of the value of the douche, which, as Dr. Baruch points out, is really a thermic massage. The form of the appliance is familiar to the majority. A rubber pipe is connected with the water pipes, and by stopcocks or valves the temperature of the water is regulated at will. The pressure found in the ordinary waterworks of cities is quite sufficient. The pipe is supplied with various nozzles varying from a single stream to a fine rain of water, and an attendant directs the stream, which can be used in an ordinary bathtub by having the wall at the back of the tub covered with zinc or metallic paint, and attaching a rubber sheet to buttons inside the tub and to hooks in the ceiling.

I quote from Dr. Baruch's book:

"\* \* \* The well-known refreshing and invigorating effects of the douche, which in France is so largely resorted to by men and women of feeble muscular fibre, by people who lead sedentary lives or lose their vigor in the whirl of fashionable dissipation. To endow the feeble muscle of the children and youths with strength, to invigorate the lax fibre of those men and women who either have no time nor inclination to indulge in normal exercise in the open air, there is certainly no measure more valuable than the cold douche carefully adapted to each individual in duration, temperature and pressure. I do not refer here to diseased conditions, but simply to abnormal feebleness in muscle and the incapacity for normal work."

It does not seem that I can add anything to Dr. Baruch's words. It would be a great convenience if some one of our inventors would devise some measure which would enable the person taking the douche to direct it himself.

THE hygienic value of the bath to people in ordinary good health is very greatly increased by a most vigorous rubbing. With the flesh brushes and gloves, the rough Turkish towels and other appliances—one of the most valuable is the narrow band of toweling—this can be administered with the greatest ease, and it should always be thorough—in fact, it is difficult to overdo. Its effect is to stimulate the reaction from the bath, and bring the vessels and nerves of the skin into a healthy, vigorous condition.

One of the most valuable baths to those in whom the organs of the lower part of the trunk are weak is the hip bath. In this the bather is seated in the bath, and the water covers the body as high as the waist. If the water be cold, that is, if we desire to stimulate the organs by the shock, a towel wet with cold water must be folded turban-wise on the head. The duration of the bath is from fifteen to twenty minutes, and its effect is immediate. The baths excite the vasomotor nerves of the abdominal organs. Their use should be prescribed by a physician.

One of the modern developments of practice is internal baths: washing the stomach and other organs of the body. The effect is marvelous. Cases of nervous prostration caused by the inability of the stomach to perform its function, which are the result of over excitement or work, have been cured by simply washing the stomach out. The process is not difficult, nor does the patient seriously object to it after the nervousness resulting from the first attempts has been overcome by experience. Water is run into the stomach and then withdrawn by the principle of siphonage, and this is repeated until the stomach is perfectly clean. This treatment, however, is not a part of ordinary bathing, and is merely alluded to in order to show how great a part water is playing in modern medical practice. The use of baths to lower the temperature of persons suffering from high fever is certainly on the increase, many physicians believing the bath to be a decided factor in the treatment of typhoid fever.

As long as the result of bathing is not to weaken the bather we can practically say a person cannot, when in health, bathe too much. I have spoken of the hygienic value of the bath, but I have said nothing of the physical pleasure to be derived from it. Every one knows the delicious feeling of cleanliness, the glow of the skin, and the general sense of robust health which follow a good bath. What is more delightful than the exhilaration of a swim in salt water? These results are a part of the experience of all, but it must not be forgotten that in these very physical pleasures there is a distinct hygienic effect.