

Breathe Easy

Salt therapy for asthma relief

By Wendy Mondello

A heavy, congested cough wracked Gina La Rosa's small frame for several months each year starting at age 5. The cough kept her up at night, leaving her exhausted during the day and it made her self-conscious when she couldn't stop the coughing fits that disrupted class in school. In the winter, when the cold air could exacerbate her condition, Gina stayed inside while all her friends went out for recess each day.

"She was sad missing her friends," says Gina's mom, Linda La Rosa of Rockaway, New Jersey. "She wanted to get better so badly."

The pulmonologist diagnosed Gina with allergy-induced asthma but physicians could never nail down exactly what triggered her wet, deep-chest cough. After frustrating years of multiple doctor visits, medical tests and various asthma medications, Gina finally found relief when she was 9 years old using salt therapy.

Salt therapy, also known as halotherapy (from the Greek word "halos" for salt), is a drug-free treatment that blows an invisible aerosol of dry salt into a climate- and humidity-controlled room that's covered from floor to ceiling in salt. The idea is that the miniscule salt particles (1 to 5 microns in size) can penetrate deep into a person's lungs to help relieve various symptoms caused by conditions that range from asthma, bronchitis and sinusitis to environmental allergies, COPD and even eczema.

"The salt itself has a specific anti-inflammatory effect on the mucous membranes, decreasing inflammation in the airways," says Nita Desai, MD, founder of the Salt Spa in Boulder, Colorado.

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Halotherapy has its origins in speleotherapy, a treatment begun in the 1800s that used the natural salt mines and salt caves in Russia and Eastern Europe to address respiratory symptoms. Based on studies of the therapeutic properties of these natural salt sites, construction of artificial salt rooms began during the 1980s. In the 1990s, Alina V. Chervinskaya, a Russian pulmonary physician, found that dry salt aerosol was key to replicating the microclimate and beneficial effects of the natural caves. A mechanism called a halogenerator was then developed to grind the salt into small particles and blow the aerosol into the salt rooms.



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Salt rooms are classified as “spas.” They are not licensed medical facilities nor are they approved by the FDA. Yet Americans like Gina La Rosa and her mother are turning to salt therapy as a drug-free treatment for medical conditions.

“My attitude was that this was our last chance to try to treat Gina’s condition with something natural,” La Rosa explains.

Etya Novik understands that. Her daughter, now 10, had a tough time with asthma as an infant. Novik recalls the difficulty of administering daily maintenance medicines, breathing treatments and more medication as illness cropped up.

“I remember the feeling of wishing there was something else to help my baby,” says Novik, who owns and operates the Respira Salt Wellness Center in Berkeley Heights, New Jersey, with her husband, Tal. A family member’s visit to a salt room in Israel piqued her interest. After she researched the therapy and visited a couple of salt rooms to experience the treatment herself, Novik decided it was a way she could help others, she says. The couple opened their salt spa in May 2010.

Gina was one of the people Novik aimed to help. Three times a week, Gina entered the child’s room at Respira, which has salt coating the walls and floor. For 45 minutes, the little girl read, drew pictures or relaxed in a lounge chair, listening to music while breathing in the dry salt air that was blown into the room.

“Gina said she felt so good and enjoyed the quiet rest she had while she was in the salt room,” La Rosa says.

At first, Gina’s nose ran a lot but within a few days, she felt some relief from her coughing, La Rosa says. After about a month, Gina’s cough was clearing up and she was sleeping a bit better.

From September through May, the months when Gina’s cough persisted each year, the young girl continued taking her medication while she routinely visited the salt spa. The following August, Gina returned to the salt spa a bit before her cough usually began and before she normally would have started taking her asthma medication. She continued to visit the spa on a regular basis into the fall months. Because she remained cough free, she never needed to start her medicine. At this point, La Rosa took her daughter to her pulmonologist for a checkup, which showed that Gina’s lungs were clear.

“Salt therapy ended up working for us,” La Rosa says.

But that isn’t the case for all salt spa customers. Nor is it a claim made by the spas themselves. Spas like Respira make it clear that salt therapy is complementary to traditional medicine. Clients are advised to follow their doctor’s advice and treatment plan and not to make changes to their medication unless discussing it with their physician.

“We don’t interfere with doctors’ treatment,” says Ines Clark, owner of The Salt Spa of Asheville in North Carolina. “It is very important to understand that this is not a healing. It is not a cure. It is a relief from the symptoms.”

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La Rosa credits salt therapy for her daughter's improved health but some members of the medical community are not convinced. Their concerns include:

- Lack of research about salt therapy published in English;
- Cost (it is not covered by insurance); and
- No regulated standards for the criteria of care.

The lack of clinical studies based in the United States is one major factor that influences doctors' view of the treatment. So far, the studies that salt spa owners rely on and cite have been conducted primarily in Russia.

Corinna Bowser, MD, an allergist with South Jersey Allergy and Asthma Associates in Cherry Hill, New Jersey, says she hasn't seen enough research to be convinced that salt therapy is effective.

"Yes, I see it as a growing trend—but there's not a lot of growing evidence," Bowser says. "Without any better studies, I can't say it's helping or it's not."

"I don't think it's going to be harmful," she continues. "The only harm might be that patients could be wasting their money."

Bowser would like to see salt therapy studied but notes that, in general, there isn't a lot of money available to study alternative medical treatments.

"I would love to see anything that people think would help them be studied in such a way that I could use it and integrate it into clinical care to improve the quality of life for my patients," agrees Leonard Bielory, MD, director of STARx Allergy and Asthma Center, LLC.

"The reason salt works in creating mucous clearance is that when salt is used as an osmotic gradient, it pulls water out," explains Bielory, who is an attending physician at Robert Wood Johnson University Hospital at Rutgers University and a professor at Rutgers.

Saline (a sterile solution of salt) is routinely used in medicine—for inhalation via nebulizer, intravenously, in nasal washes and nasal sprays, etc. Hypertonic saline (higher concentration) nasal spray has shown some success in drawing fluid out of the tissue, Bowser says. But these uses of salt don't necessarily translate to an endorsement of the way salt is used in salt spas, she adds.

"You can have the best explanation why theoretically the osmotic effect of salt should be good, but you have to show first that it actually works in the real-life situation."

Bielory is not convinced that salt therapy is the answer, either long term or short term. He says he has not seen proof that warrants administering it as therapeutic treatment.



Children in a child-friendly salt room

Courtesy of Respira Salt Wellness Center



“There are no studies that I can tell you that provide any definitive results of quality, quantity, duration or specific treatment groups that benefit from this type of intervention,” he says.

Bielory is also concerned about the lack of standards regulating the spas, such as precautions to prevent bacteria from growing and thriving in the rooms.

“We feel that it’s a very safe therapy. The proof is in people getting better,” responds Desai, who opened the Salt Spa in the same facility as her medical practice, East-West Integrated Medicine. “There’s been a lot of research in Eastern Europe and this treatment is used therapeutically there. Just because there is no U.S. data on it, doesn’t mean it doesn’t work.”

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What to Expect

- **Peaceful place.** You’ll enter a dimly lit room where salt covers the walls and floor. Relaxing music is piped into the space. Salt sculptures or designs often dot the landscape of the salt room. Lounge chairs are set up where people can sit quietly, meditate, sleep or read.
- **Room for children.** Sessions are geared to children where, in place of lounge chairs, there are sand toys to play in the salt on the floor.
- **Other services.** Some spas offer programs to enhance the relaxation, such as yoga, reiki, meditation and massage therapy.
- **Salt room etiquette.** Don’t bring in any electronic devices. Special foot coverings or white socks may be provided to preserve the salt floor. A light blanket may be offered or clients may be asked to bring a light jacket.
- **Variable cost.** Depending on location, salt therapy averages about \$45 for each 45-minute session. Most spas offer discounts when packages for multiple sessions are purchased. Senior and children discounts also are available.
- **Himalayan salt.** Spas like the Salt Spa in Boulder, Colorado, use Himalayan salt because of its purity, says co-owner Allen Tawa.
- **Who shouldn’t go.** Most salt spas recommend that people with certain medical conditions avoid salt therapy, such as those with fever, cardiac disease, tuberculosis or those in the acute stage of an illness.
- **Salt aerosol.** A halogenerator blows invisible dry salt air into the room. A ventilation system ensures that used air goes out and is not recycled.

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The protocol for how often clients should use the salt room varies. In general, most salt spas recommend about 12 sessions. Allen Tawa, owner of the Salt Spa in Boulder, explains that the type and severity of the condition factors into how many sessions are necessary. He tells clients before they start that it could take 12 to 24 sessions before they notice significant improvement. He compares spa

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therapy to a lifestyle change, such as regularly going to the gym.

"If you're looking for the quick fix, this isn't the place," Tawa says. "We're not throwing drugs at problems. This is a natural alternative that will take time."

ynne Salley of Arden, North Carolina, tried out The Salt Spa of Asheville in late spring 2012 and has since integrated salt therapy into her life. Salley, who has had several lung infections since 2005, suffers from bronchiectasis, a destructive widening of the large airways. She noticed that when 3 percent saline was added to the albuterol that she inhales via a nebulizer, her inhalations were more effective. She thought salt therapy could help her even more.

"I was just amazed at how much better I felt when I came out of there," says Salley, 67, who drinks a lot of water to rehydrate after deep breathing in the salt room.

Not everyone exits a session of salt therapy feeling better—or even feeling anything. Clients are unique and experience salt therapy in various ways. Some people have a runny nose after the first session. Others take a few sessions to cough up a significant amount of mucous and then feel relief. Asthmatics often feel worse before they feel better, Desai explains, because they are initially coughing more once they start producing mucous.

Desai takes those differences into account when she implements the Salt Spa protocols that she says are based on the research from Russia and fine-tuned. "We've worked with a lot of people now and obtained a lot of data from that."

Desai adjusts session lengths to fit different medical conditions at the spa, which serves nearly 150 people per week. She says that asthmatics have better results with more frequent, shorter sessions.

Salley says it's worth trying out salt therapy a few times a week for at least a couple of weeks to see if it is beneficial.

"If you have a problem and you want relief, you can't just go once a week. You have to give it a chance," she says.

Salley started with three sessions a week at The Salt Spa of Asheville and said she felt a difference. Her chest didn't feel as tight; it felt like the mucous was loosening and coming up, she says. So she opted to go to the salt room every day for 30 days.

Before starting the therapy, Salley's shortness of breath made it difficult for her to use the stairs without becoming short-winded. Now she can climb up and down the stairs in her home a few times without losing her breath. She now visits the salt spa twice a week and plans to continue going as part of her wellness routine.

"Between the 3 percent saline that I inhale twice a day and going to the salt spa, it has made a major difference," Salley says.

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There's another aspect of salt therapy that Salley enjoys. Since 1996, she has cared for various family members and she is now the caregiver for her husband, who has Alzheimer's disease. The stress of the past several years contributed to the deterioration of her health, she says, but she credits the relaxation inherent in the salt sessions with helping her refuel.

Clark of The Salt Spa of Asheville agrees that salt therapy provides relaxation in addition to helping relieve respiratory symptoms. She learned about the therapy in the salt mines as part of her training to be a physical therapist in East Germany, where she grew up. When she visited a salt room in Germany in 2010, she noted the calming effects and decided a salt spa would marry her interests in health care and relaxation. She opened the Asheville spa in December 2011.

“My background is also in relaxation, meditation, maintaining the balance of an outward active life and a quiet life within—and this is a perfect way to do that,” Clark says. “It’s a very relaxing experience where people can just de-stress.”

About 15 percent of Clark’s client base of about 200 people visit the spa for meditation and relaxation. The spa offers yoga classes to deepen the effect of the salt therapy, Clark says.

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So why not just go to the beach to relax and breathe in the salt air?

Many people return from the beach feeling revived and even saying their respiratory conditions benefit from the salt air. La Rosa says her daughter’s improved health during a visit to the shore is what inspired her to look into salt therapy.

(There are many factors at the beach—other than salt—that can make a person feel better or worse while there. The sea breeze blows allergens away from the shoreline, helping some breathe more easily. On the other hand, some individuals may be allergic to certain plants that bloom near the shore or the beach house where they’re staying may harbor mold or dust mites.)

While the air in a salt room might be compared to ocean air, the concentration of salt in the air is much higher than that at the beach, Novik says. In addition, the salt particles in ocean air are too large to penetrate low enough in the lungs, according to Clark. The larger salt particles in sea air access the upper respiratory system, affecting the nostrils and throat but not farther down the respiratory tract, she notes.

As more salt spas open up around the country, Linda La Rosa understands that the debate about the effectiveness of halotherapy will certainly continue. She’s just happy that her daughter finally found relief from years of nagging respiratory symptoms.

“The salt spa is Gina’s little oasis. She always looks great when she comes out with color in her cheeks,” she says.

Gina, now 12, enjoys playing with her friends at recess—even during the winter.

“She’s so happy,” La Rosa says.

Wendy Mondello (tasteofallergyfreeliving.blogspot.com) has two children, one with asthma and multiple severe food allergies. She lives in North Carolina.



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