

A photograph of a man, Jim Karas, inside a cryotherapy chamber. He is shirtless, muscular, and has short, graying hair. He is looking off to the side with a slight smile. The chamber is dark and has a perforated metal interior. The background is a soft, out-of-focus grey.

CELEBRITY TRAINER **JIM KARAS** IS
FREEZING TIME WITH CRYOTHERAPY

STORY BY JOURDAN FAIRCHILD | PHOTOS BY ANTHONY TAHIER

The Big Chill

“Where’s Mr. Freeze? I wanna go get frozen!” That’s the phrase fitness guru Jim Karas has been hearing virtually everywhere he goes lately. “I’ll be at a book party or a gala, and people will tap me on my shoulder and then give me a litany of reasons why they’re looking for the ice solution,” he says.

Six weeks ago, Karas, a Chicago-based celebrity trainer and best-selling author, introduced Windy City residents to the latest technology sweeping the health and fitness world: cryotherapy (“cryo” for short). The treatment uses liquid nitrogen to lower a person’s skin to temperatures between 41°F to 50°F for up to three minutes, leading to what proponents say is a reduction in inflammation, healing of torn muscles and joints, revved-up metabolism and release of endorphins.

Clients can choose between a whole-body treatment, which involves standing still inside an 8-foot-tall cylindrical chamber, or localized therapy performed with a wand on the face or on specific areas of the body that are in distress. This all happens inside Chicago Cryospa, Karas’s new, 1,200-square-foot facility located smack dab between his Lincoln Park gyms, making it easy for members (Karas included) to pop by after workouts.

Already, local legends like former Cubs pitcher Kerry Wood are clamoring for time in Karas’ freeze machine. As for Karas, he hops in the full-body machine four to five times per week, and has his face and two specific injuries frozen locally three to four times a week.

So how did Karas catch his cold obsession? In March, one of his clients passed along word of the treatment, then only in two cities: Atlanta and Los Angeles. Serendipitously, Karas was planning to travel to both places in the following weeks for work. He tested cryotherapy in Atlanta first, then in LA, where Jonas and Robin Kuehne, the brothers responsible for the California facility, Cryohealthcare, schooled him on the technology — plus the logistics — of opening his own spa. Within hours of his return to Chicago, Karas had signed the lease for Cryospa. “I’ve never made such a fast business decision in my life,” he says.

Yes, Karas knows what you might be thinking. “This sounds like voodoo; this sounds hokey,” he admits. But the health expert swears it’s no gimmick. “Over the past 27 years, I’ve been offered every supplement, every piece of crazy equipment out there,” he says. “Cryotherapy is different. It makes me feel invigorated, young, healthy.”

The treatment also aligns with Karas’ cardio-free philosophy. In short, Karas believes that interval strength training, rather than classic cardio, leads to better heart health, increased flexibility and mobility, and a boosted metabolic rate. And based on his high-profile roster of clients — which includes the perma-buff Hugh Jackman and Diane Sawyer — he knows how to get results.



“I’ve tried all kinds of ways to treat my injuries over the years,” says Kerry Wood, a client of Karas. “With this, I got the same results — without the hassle or time of sitting in a painfully cold tub of ice.”



Karas has come a long way for someone who never pictured himself wearing sneakers to work. Back in 1986, when the Glenview native was a private portfolio manager, he took an exercise class at North Shore Club in Morton Grove. The teacher never showed up, so Karas filled in (he had memorized the routine) and earned a free membership and a \$4.50-an-hour job. He’s never looked back. Drawing on his business background and fitness fanaticism, Karas has since opened studios in Lincoln Park and Westmont, hired a slew of ultrafit trainers and written five books — four of which were New York Times best-sellers.

So it’s with great caution that Karas approached cryotherapy. “I always try things myself first, and then I have my 35 trainers try it, followed by our clients,” he says. And while the whole thing might sound like it’s straight out of a science-fiction movie, cold therapy has been around for centuries. Ancient Egyptians were aware of the anti-inflammatory properties of cold, and the development of cryosurgery in the early 20th century allowed doctors to use the freezing technique to combat diseased tissue. In 1978, whole-body cryotherapy was developed in Japan to treat rheumatoid arthritis, but Polish scientists were the first to use it to relieve chronic pain at the Olympic training and rehabilitation center in Spala, Poland.

The use of cryotherapy continues to grow, but the mainstream medical community has yet to conduct detailed studies on the treatment and its benefits. “There’s some science behind it, but right now there aren’t enough studies on it yet for me to say if it conclusively works,” says Dr. Ari Levy, co-CEO of Engaged Health Solutions in Chicago. “But it’s working from the same concept as an ice bath, which we often use to help athletes recover.” Dr. Kris Alden, an orthopedic surgeon at Hinsdale Orthopaedics, echoes the sentiment. “I actually use cold therapy devices on a majority of my patients,” he says. “I think you just have to be careful about hypothermia — being in there too long. If you watch for that, there’s limited downside potential.”

Kerry Wood, who has a history of chronic pain, remained skeptical until he tried it. But after a catch in his back felt significantly better after a single local treatment, “I was a believer,” Wood says. Whole-body treatments continue to relieve his soreness after he works out.

Beyond elite athletes, people with a range of needs are finding relief from the treatment (with the exception of those who aren’t allowed to do it because of cardiovascular problems, high blood pressure or because they’re pregnant). Chicagoan Cheryl Tricoci became a believer after a single session. “I went in on a Thursday to get treatment on my injured knee,” she says. “Within an hour or so, the swelling was gone, and by Friday, I was dancing in high heels at a party.”

Even Karas’ children have jumped on the bandwagon. Olivia, his 16-year-old daughter, relies on treatments several times a week to keep her in top gymnastics-competition shape. “Evan, who’s 12, would live in the machine if he could,” Karas says. Clients with rheumatoid arthritis who are normally sore the day after workouts tell Karas they’re not in pain if they do cryo directly afterward.

Another major perk of the treatment? Boosted metabolism. After hopping in the whole-body chamber, your body will need to work double time to restore itself to a normal temperature. The freezing also irritates skin, disrupting deep layers of collagen that respond by creating more of the protein — and more collagen means smoother, younger-looking skin. According to Karas, even those suffering from depression have expressed positive changes in their mood after treatments.

To experience optimum results, Karas suggests undergoing 5-10 sessions in close succession. The treatment isn’t cheap (\$65 for a single session,

Playing it cool

“I’m a big baby when it comes to being cold,” I warned Jim Karas when I arrived at Chicago Cryospa. Maybe it’s because I was raised in the South, or because I have bad circulation, but the thought of voluntarily freezing myself scared me stiff.

But the spirited Karas reassured me (“You’re gonna feel great!”) as he explained exactly what would happen during each of the three treatments. I started with the CryoFacial, a 10-minute procedure during which Spa Director Kristen Freiburger passed a wand releasing liquid nitrogen over my face. While I didn’t notice any reduction in my pores, my face definitely felt tighter. Freiburger also waved the wand over my knees, which sometimes give me pain. I think I’d need a few more sessions to see much change there.

For the whole-



body treatment, I slipped into a robe and slippers, plus two sets of gloves and two pairs of socks to prevent acute frostbite. Once inside the chamber, I removed the robe as the floor rose to expose my head and neck. For the next two minutes (which felt like 10), Freiburger distracted me by talking while I marched in place to keep my body busy.

Post-treatment, she recorded the temperature of my skin: a frigid 42 degrees! My thighs felt particularly tight, and my toes took hours to thaw out. Was it refreshing? In a really weird way, yes. I’m just proud I didn’t get cold feet.

— Jourdan Fairchild

with discounts of up to 40 percent for multiple sessions), but in a world where time is money, a 10-minute facial trumps a 60-minute facial. And the results speak for themselves: When Karas opened the spa, he had calculated that he would need to fill the liquid nitrogen tank every few weeks. Instead, his team is filling it nearly every other day, and they’re making plans for new equipment and expansions. “People are rushing in, and then in 15 minutes, they’re out of here feeling fantastic,” he says. “You just can’t beat that.”