

Health Promotion in Certified SPA and Balneotherapy (Medical SPA) Centres in Stara Zagora Region

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Abstract. This study aims to assess the conditions for health promotion available in the region of Stara Zagora in certified SPA and Balneotherapy (Medical SPA) centers. **METHODS** Based on Internet sources, an analysis of the offered programs, packages and procedures, and accessibility to mineral waters. **RESULTS** 8 certified Balneotherapy (Medical SPA) centers and 4 SPA centers are available on the territory of the Stara Zagora region. **CONCLUSIONS** The presence of mineral springs, the mild climate, and investments in a very good hotel base are conditions for developing tourism and promoting health in the region words.

1 Global Wellness Economy

According to GWI (Global Wellness Institute), the wellness economy refers to industries that facilitate the integration of wellness activities and lifestyles into the daily lives of consumers. This concept encompasses different sectors that are diverse and encompass a wide range of industries.

The main directions are Healthy Eating, Nutrition, & Weight Loss; Mental Wellness; Personal Care & Beauty; Physical Activity; Wellness Real Estate; Wellness Tourism, Spas, and Thermal/Mineral Springs; Workplace Wellness; Traditional & Complementary Medicine, and Public Health, Prevention, & Personalized Medicine According to GWI, the global wellness economy experienced significant growth between 2017 and 2019, increasing from \$4.3 trillion to \$4.9 trillion. This translates to an annual growth rate of 6.6%, which is higher than the global economic growth rate of 4.0%.

In 2020, due to the impact of the global pandemic, the wellness economy contracted by 11.0% to \$4.4 trillion, while global GDP saw a decline of 2.8%. GWI predicts that the global wellness economy will experience strong growth, with an annual rate of 9.9%. This growth rate is significantly higher than the projected global economic growth of 7.3% according to current IMF forecasts. As the global economy recovers from the impact of the pandemic, the wellness economy is expected to reach \$5.0 trillion in 2021, surpassing its pre-pandemic peak in 2019. Furthermore, it is projected to continue growing and reach nearly \$7.0 trillion by 2025 [1].

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2 Health tourism

Health tourism can be categorized into two main branches: wellness tourism, which includes spa and wellness activities, and medical tourism.

Wellness tourism focuses on promoting overall well-being and relaxation. It encompasses activities such as visiting spas, resorts, and wellness retreats, where individuals engage in various treatments and practices to enhance their physical and mental health. These may include massages, yoga, meditation, healthy eating, and other lifestyle-enhancing activities.

On the other hand, medical tourism involves traveling to a different country or region to receive specialized medical treatments or procedures. People opt for medical tourism when seeking high-quality healthcare services, often at a lower cost or with shorter waiting times compared to their home countries. Medical tourism commonly includes procedures such as elective surgeries, dental treatments, fertility treatments, cosmetic procedures, and more.

Both wellness tourism and medical tourism cater to individuals who are seeking to improve their health and well-being, but they differ in their specific focus. Wellness tourism emphasizes relaxation, rejuvenation, and holistic well-being, while medical tourism primarily focuses on accessing specialized medical treatments and procedures.

According to a report by the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) and the European Travel Commission in 2018, wellness tourism is a form of tourism that focuses on improving and harmonizing various aspects of human life. It encompasses physical, mental, emotional, professional, intellectual, and spiritual well-being. The primary motivation for wellness tourists is to engage in activities that promote a preventive and proactive approach to enhancing their lifestyles. These activities may include fitness, healthy eating, relaxation, and healing procedures. The goal is to achieve overall wellness and lead a healthier and more fulfilling life.

Medical tourism involves individuals traveling to different destinations to access healthcare services that are based on established medical practices and knowledge. These services can include a wide range of medical procedures and treatments, tailored to meet the specific needs of patients seeking medical assistance.

The primary purpose of medical tourism is to provide individuals with opportunities to receive high-quality medical care, often at more affordable costs or with shorter waiting times than what may be available in their home countries. By traveling to different regions or countries, individuals can access specialized medical expertise and advanced technologies that may not be readily available in their local healthcare systems.

Medical tourism emphasizes the importance of evidence-based medical practices, ensuring that the treatments and services provided are supported by scientific research and established protocols. This includes not only the actual medical procedures but also the diagnosis, prevention, and rehabilitation aspects of healthcare [2,3].

According to Lunt et al. [4], medical tourism primarily revolves around a specific subset of elective medical procedures. This subset includes various types of treatments such as dental care, cosmetic surgery, elective surgery, and fertility treatment.

3 Health Promotion

The European Commission launched the Healthier together – EU non-communicable diseases (NCD) initiative in December 2021 with the aim of assisting EU countries in addressing major NCDs and enhancing the health and well-being of their citizens. This initiative, which will be in effect from 2022 to 2027, encompasses five key areas:

- Health determinants: Focusing on population-level health promotion and disease prevention of NCDs, complementing the efforts of Europe's Beating Cancer Plan.

- Cardiovascular diseases: Implementing policies and actions to reduce the burden of cardiovascular diseases within the EU.
- Diabetes: Identifying effective strategies to prevent and manage diabetes, considering the growing prevalence of the condition.
- Chronic respiratory diseases: Addressing the challenges posed by chronic respiratory diseases and developing measures to improve prevention and treatment.
- Mental health and neurological disorders: Promoting mental well-being and addressing neurological disorders through targeted policies and actions.

Each of these strands incorporates a health equity dimension, emphasizing the importance of reducing health inequalities across the EU. It is worth noting that actions related to cancer, another significant NCD, are covered under the separate Europe's Beating Cancer Plan [5].

According to the Annex of the Commission Implementing Decision on the financing of the EU4Health Programme and the work program for 2023, the budget allocated for health promotion and disease prevention (DP) is 33.54 million EUR. The budget is distributed across various action areas as follows:

- Tobacco control policies: 4.0 million EUR
- Prevention of non-communicable diseases (NCDs) including chronic respiratory diseases, mental health, and dementia: 18.36 million EUR
- Operating grants: 9.0 million EUR
- Support to health policy platform, scientific committees, expert groups, and European Climate and Health Observatory: 2.18 million EUR

These budget allocations aim to support and implement initiatives and activities related to tobacco control, prevention of NCDs, operating grants, and support for health policy platforms, scientific committees, and expert groups, as well as the European Climate and Health Observatory [6].

Health promotion involves empowering individuals to take control of their health and improve it. It goes beyond focusing solely on individual behaviors and encompasses a wide range of social and environmental interventions. It recognizes the significant influence of social and economic factors on health outcomes.

Health promotion takes a strengths-based approach and addresses behaviors influenced by various contexts that may pose as risk factors for diseases, whether independently or in the presence of disease. This includes areas such as tobacco and alcohol use, dietary choices, physical activity, healthy aging, mental health, prevention of violence and injuries, control of drug abuse, promotion of sexually transmitted disease prevention, and sexual health.

An essential element for effective health promotion is health literacy, which involves equipping individuals with the knowledge and skills necessary to make informed decisions about their health. Health literacy plays a crucial role in empowering individuals to engage in health-promoting behaviors and navigate health systems effectively [7].

4 Study opportunities for Health Promotion in Certified SPA and Balneotherapy (Medical SPA) Centres in Stara Zagora Region

The present study aims to evaluate the conditions for health promotion available in Stara Zagora region in certified spa and balneotherapy (Medical Spa) centers. The National Tourist Register lists the certified centers according to Ordinance No. 04-14 of October 9, 2019 on the terms and conditions for certification of "Balneotherapy (medical SPA) center", "SPA center", "Wellness center" and "Thalassotherapy center". In the Stara Zagora region there are 8 certified "Balneotherapy (medical SPA) centers" and 4 "SPA centers".

The combination of mineral springs, a mild climate, and significant investments in infrastructure positions the region as a promising destination for tourism, contributing to its economic and social development.

In accordance with the digital presentation, an assessment was made of the availability of programs, procedures and activities for health promotion in five areas: Weight control (healthy eating, detox programs); Physical activity; Eco and adventures; Mind-body practices; SPA.

Table 1. Health Promotion in Certified SPA and Balneotherapy (Medical SPA) Centres in Stara Zagora Region.

Weight control	Physical activity	Eco and adventures	Mind-body	SPA
33,33%	66,67%	41,67%	8,33%	100%

Table 1 shows the distribution of health promotion activities in certified SPA and Balneotherapy centers in the Stara Zagora Region. The categories include Weight control (33.33%), Physical activity (66.67%), Eco and adventures (41.67%), Mind-body (8.33%), and SPA (100%). Weight control focuses on managing a healthy weight, while Physical activity emphasizes fitness activities. Eco and adventures promote nature-based experiences, and the Mind-body focuses on mental well-being. The SPA category represents the overall services offered. These centers offer a range of activities, including personalized diets, fitness classes, outdoor adventures, meditation, and various SPA treatments. The table provides an overview of the health promotion offerings in the region.

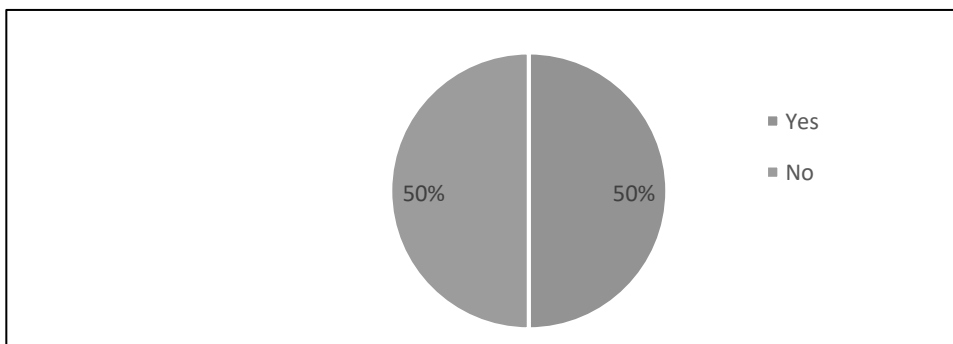


Fig. 1. Availability of a comprehensive description of the procedures.

Approximately 50% of the digital presentation of the available services lacks comprehensive explanations.

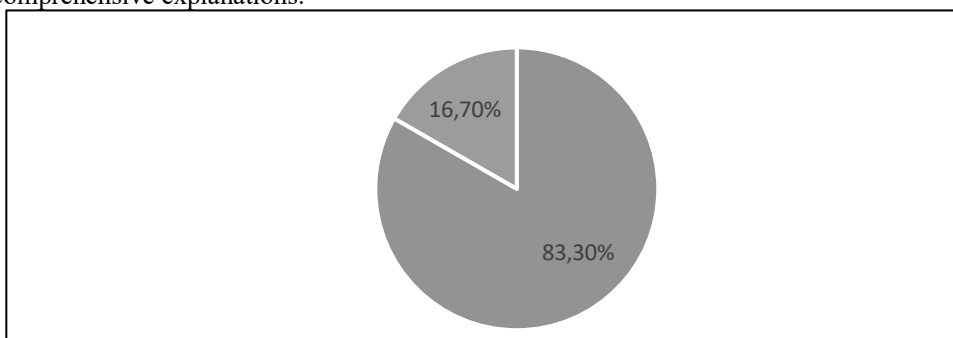


Fig. 2. Availability of procedure prices.

Around 16.7% of the services offered do not have data available regarding their value.

Table 2. Advantages and Opportunities for Health Promotion in Certified SPA and Balneotherapy (Medical SPA) Centres in Stara Zagora Region

Advantages	Opportunities
Facilities	Healthy eating
Specialists	Eco and adventures
Environment and natural resources	Health education

The availability of mineral springs is a valuable natural resource that can attract tourists seeking relaxation, wellness, and therapeutic experiences. The healing properties associated with mineral springs make them an attractive feature for visitors, leading to the development of spa and wellness tourism.

The region's mild climate provides favorable conditions for outdoor activities and recreation throughout the year. Tourists can enjoy various outdoor pursuits such as hiking, cycling, and sightseeing, enhancing their overall experience and attracting more visitors to the region.

The region's commitment to investing in a robust material base, including accommodation, transportation, and amenities, further supports the development of tourism. These investments ensure that tourists have access to quality services and facilities, enhancing their satisfaction and encouraging repeat visits.

5 Conclusion

The region's potential for tourism development is supported by several factors, including the presence of mineral springs, a mild climate, and significant investments in infrastructure and facilities. These favorable conditions create opportunities for the growth of tourism in the area and contribute to its overall development.

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