

# Health Benefits of Nature



Many governments and health care practitioners recognize the health benefits of protecting natural spaces and increasing access to them. Some doctors give prescriptions to their patients to get out in nature, and ecotherapy is becoming better known. It turns out that conserving natural spaces is just what the doctor ordered!

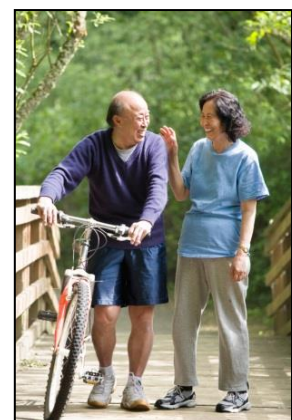


## Nature is Good for the Mind

- Spending time in nature can improve mental health, for diagnosed conditions or common daily stress.
- Interactions with nature can lower blood pressure, reduce depression and feelings of fear, anger or aggression.
- In both children and adults, contact with nature can reduce ADD symptoms. Spending time in green spaces allows people to think more clearly.
- In neighborhoods with 10% less tree cover, people are more likely to report signs of depression, anxiety, and stress
- Children's cognitive development can be improved through regular, direct contact with nature. People experiencing dementia can decrease aggressive behavior by spending time in nature. Even brief interactions with nature can produce increases in cognitive control in the form of improved attention and memory in people of all ages.
- Forest walks decrease blood pressure, heart rate, sympathetic nerve activity and the stress hormone cortisol
- Living near green space can lower a person's stress levels.

## Nature is Good for the Body

- Children who live in neighbourhoods with more green space have lower Body Mass Indexes (indicating a healthier weight and activity level) than children who live further away from natural spaces.
- Patients recover faster and require less medicine when they can view green spaces from their hospital rooms, rather than just blank walls.
- Access to nature increases the likelihood that individuals will exercise, and sustain their exercise levels over the long term. Consistent physical activity prevents obesity and a range of common diseases, such as diabetes and heart disease. The likelihood that individuals are physically active can be three times greater in neighbourhoods with more green space.
- Time in nature, rather than with televisions or computer screens, can even reduce nearsightedness in children.
- Elderly people are more likely to get the recommended 2.5 hours of weekly walking when they have access to green space.



- Tree loss in communities correlates with increased mortality from cardiovascular and lower respiratory diseases
- Mothers who live in greener neighbourhoods deliver bigger babies, and are much more likely carry a baby to term than those who live in less green areas

## Nature Protects and Provides

- Nature provides ecological services such as protecting drinking water, filtering pollutants, purifying the air, and moderating our climate, all of which impact our health in positive ways. For example, natural spaces can decrease the average temperatures in urban spaces, thereby protecting individuals from illness and stress induced by hot weather.
- Reduced contact with nature and biodiversity has increased the prevalence of allergies around the world. Certain bacteria, more common in green environments, can suppress allergic responses to common irritants such as pollen and animals. The soil bacteria *Mycobacterium vaccae*, is also a natural antidepressant.



- Children exposed to nature at a younger age develop better immune systems and have reduced rates of asthma. For every 350 trees per square km, asthma rates can drop by as much as 25% in young children.

- When we lose nature, and the plant and animal diversity it houses, we lose opportunities to discover new medicines. Some of the medical treatments discovered in nature include Aspirin from willows, and Taxol (used in chemotherapy for a range of cancers) from the Pacific Yew Tree.

- Fewer protected natural areas can increase the incidence of disease around the world. Forest fragmentation reduces the diversity of vertebrates, which increases the ability of vector-borne diseases (e.g., West Nile virus) to spread.

### *Protection and stewardship of natural areas results in:*

- A healthier population, both mentally and physically
- Fewer diseases and pollution generated illnesses
- More opportunities to discover lifesaving drugs and medical breakthroughs
- Reduced health care costs

*And a healthier future for us all!*



The Edmonton and Area Land Trust plays an important role in providing health, educational, socio-economic and environmental benefits for the entire Capital Region, both urban and suburban. Contact us for more information about our research sources.  
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The University of Alberta's Policy, Location and Access in Community Environments (PLACE) Research Lab in the School of Public Health supports the information presented above, and encourages people to get out in nature. 3-300 ECHA, 11405-87 Avenue, Edmonton, AB (780) 492-3902 www.placeresearchlab.com