

# How Immersing Yourself in Nature Benefits Your Health



By [Dr. Joseph Mercola](#) | [mercola.com](https://mercola.com)

## STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- Compared to no nature contact, spending 120 minutes or more in nature during the previous week was associated with a greater likelihood of good health or high well-being
- Getting recommended levels of nature exposure weekly could result in a similar magnitude of health gains as achieving recommended levels of physical activity
- Humans' alienation from nature may lead to "diminished use of the senses, attention difficulties and higher

rates of physical and emotional illnesses”

- In psychiatric patients, gardening led to improved mood and pro-social behavior while fostering a sense of community, belonging and shared purpose

If you feel revived and energized after a hike through the woods or an afternoon in a local park, there’s likely an intrinsic reason why: Spending time in nature is good for your health. Although modern-day humans are, unfortunately, often disconnected from the natural world, spending much of their time indoors in man-made structures instead of outdoors, humans have deep connections with nature.

It’s not surprising, then, that accumulating evidence shows you can boost your health and well-being by [taking time to revel in nature](#), and there’s even research showing just how much time you should spend in nature to reap the greatest benefits.

## **Two Hours a Week: The Ideal Nature ‘Dose’**

A study published in Scientific Reports explored the associations between contact with nature in the last seven days and self-reported health and well-being.<sup>1</sup> Data from 19,806 participants were included, revealing that, compared to no nature contact, spending 120 minutes or more in nature during the previous week was associated with a greater likelihood of good health or high well-being.

In this case, more wasn’t necessarily better, as the researchers noted, “Positive associations peaked between 200 and 300 minutes per week with no further gain.”<sup>2</sup>

Also important, the benefits were achieved no matter how the time was split up, so spending 120 minutes on one occasion had the same effect as multiple shorter visits, and the benefits

held true across different populations, including older adults and people with long-term health issues.

The researchers even suggested that, with further research, weekly nature guidelines could be developed similar to those given for physical activity. In fact, the study found that getting recommended levels of nature exposure weekly could result in a similar magnitude of health gains as achieving recommended levels of physical activity.<sup>3</sup>

Indeed, the health benefits of the deceptively simple act of spending time in nature are immense. As noted in Scientific Reports:

*“A growing body of epidemiological evidence indicates that greater exposure to, or ‘contact with’, natural environments (such as parks, woodlands and beaches) is associated with better health and well-being, at least among populations in high income, largely urbanised, societies.*

*While the quantity and quality of evidence varies across outcomes, living in greener urban areas is associated with lower probabilities of cardiovascular disease, obesity, diabetes, asthma hospitalisation, mental distress, and ultimately mortality, among adults; and lower risks of obesity and myopia in children.*

*Greater quantities of neighbourhood nature are also associated with better self-reported health, and subjective well-being in adults, and improved birth outcomes, and cognitive development, in children.”<sup>4</sup>*

## **Have You Heard of Nature-Deficit**

# Disorder?

The term “nature-deficit disorder” was coined by journalist Richard Louv, author of “Last Child in the Woods.”<sup>5</sup> This is not an actual psychological diagnosis, but rather a term used to describe a lifestyle deficit that contributes to poor psychological and physical health.

Louv suggested that humans’ alienation from nature led to “diminished use of the senses, attention difficulties and higher rates of physical and emotional illnesses.”<sup>6</sup> Speaking with Yale Environment 360, Louv explained that there’s been a surge in research highlighting the ill effects of a nature deficit in recent years:

*“When I wrote Last Child in the Woods in 2005, this wasn’t a hot topic. This subject was virtually ignored by the academic world. I could find 60 studies that were good studies. Now it’s approaching and about to pass 1,000 studies, and they point in one direction: Nature is not only nice to have, but it’s a have-to-have for physical health and cognitive functioning.”<sup>7</sup>*

A 2019 study revealed, for example, that patients in a psychiatric hospital benefited immensely from gardening.<sup>8</sup> Working with plants and soil stimulated reflective processes in the patients, who used the activity and the garden itself symbolically to gain insights into their illness.

Along with providing calmness and a needed change of environment from the hospital setting, gardening led to improved mood and pro-social behavior while fostering a sense of community, belonging and shared purpose.

The patients also experienced reduced isolation and felt the

activity gave them a distraction from unpleasant thoughts. [Gardening](#) may be so powerful, in part due to what's known as attention restoration theory:<sup>9</sup>

*“Attention restoration theory suggests the ability to concentrate may be restored by exposure to natural environments.*

*Participating in gardening activities allowed an individual to move mentally and physically to a different place, provided an opportunity to feel connected to a larger world and allowed the participant to engage in their environment to meet their needs and interests, all of which contribute to the restorative environment.*

*Engagement in gardening activities has been associated with stress reduction, increased focused attention, social health, and self-efficacy.”*

The flip side is also true, in that city living is linked to mood and [anxiety disorders](#), as well as increased incidence of [schizophrenia](#), and it could be that lack of access to green spaces is one reason why.<sup>10</sup> On the other hand, green spaces with the highest levels of plants, butterflies, and birds, otherwise known as species richness or biodiversity, may further enhance psychological health.<sup>11</sup>

Another meta-analysis of 103 observational and 40 interventional studies investigating about 100 health outcomes revealed that spending more time in [green spaces](#) is associated with decreased:<sup>12</sup>

Salivary cortisol (a marker of stress)	Heart rate
Diastolic blood pressure	Preterm birth

Type 2 diabetes	All-cause mortality
Cardiovascular mortality	

---

## **‘Park Deserts,’ Urbanization and Digital Creep**

A number of factors have intertwined to make nature-deficit the norm instead of the exception. You may have heard of the term “food desert,” which describes communities that have limited access to nutritious foods. “Park deserts” also exist, in which communities lack green spaces for their residents to spend time in.

With younger generations spending increasing amounts of time staring at screens, living in urban environments without access to natural spaces, the disconnectedness from nature is getting worse instead of better. In the U.K., for instance, more than 80% of the population lives in urban areas – a percentage that’s similar to that in other high-income countries.<sup>13</sup>

While national policies to increase access to natural spaces are limited, local-level policies may exist to encourage the existence of and usage of natural spaces. That being said, “the last 20 years has seen an increasing disconnection of people from nature in many countries,” researchers wrote in *Urban Ecosystems*.<sup>14</sup>

Florence Williams, the author of “The Nature Fix,” explained that one of the symptoms of “mass generational amnesia enabled by urbanization and digital creep” is that kids in both the U.S. and the U.K. spend about [half the time outdoors](#) than their parents did a few generations ago.

Fortunately, efforts are underway to change this, including in workplaces. Williams told Yale Environment 360, “It’s needed to attract a skilled workforce. Young people are demanding high-quality outdoor experiences.”<sup>15</sup>

In fact, a survey by HR advisory firm Future Workplace even found that access to natural light and outdoor views was the No. 1 most sought-after attribute of the workplace environment, beating out fitness centers, on-site child care and cafeterias.<sup>16</sup>

Even schooling is increasingly taking place outdoors. Louv, who co-founded the Children & Nature Network to increase children’s time spent in nature, said outdoor schools, where the majority of learning occurs in natural spaces, have increased by 500% since 2012 in the U.S.<sup>17</sup>

## **Five Top Barriers to Spending Time in Nature**

While in theory spending time in nature sounds good, in practice many are falling short of “recommended” amounts of nature time. A report commissioned by Velux, a window manufacturing company, revealed that 25% of Americans hardly ever go outside.<sup>18,19</sup>

“We are increasingly turning into a generation of indoor people where the only time we get daylight and fresh air midweek is on the commute to work or school,” Peter Foldbjerg, the head of daylight energy and indoor climate at Velux, said in statement.<sup>20</sup>

In another survey of 11,817 U.S. adults and children, 25% of adults reported spending less than two hours in nature each week.<sup>21</sup> The Nature of Americans report<sup>22</sup> described a significant

gap between Americans' interest in nature and their efforts and ability to pursue that interest.

While numerous factors are contributing to an increasing disconnect between Americans and nature, the report highlighted five of the most prominent:<sup>23</sup>

1. Physical places, or a built environment, generally discourage contact with the natural world.
2. Competing priorities for time, attention and money prevent contact with nature from becoming routine and habitual.
3. Declining direct dependence on the natural world for livelihoods and subsistence allows Americans to orient their lives to other things.
4. New technologies, especially [electronic media](#), distract and captivate.
5. Shifting expectations about what "good" contact to nature ought to be mean adults are generally satisfied with the relatively little time they spend outdoors in nature.

## How Much Time Do You Spend in Nature?

The featured study suggests it only requires 120 minutes a week to reap the benefits that nature has to offer to your physical and psychological health. Better still, you can break it up any way you want – one hour twice a week, 20 minutes six days a week, and so on. It's a manageable quantity that should be achievable, provided you make it a weekly priority.

For some, this may mean penciling it into your schedule the way you would other important appointments. You can also combine nature with already scheduled activities. Exercising outdoors is one excellent option, but you can take this even further, taking conference calls outside, spending your lunch



break in a park or even holding outdoor meetings.

You can get your children involved, too, taking 20 minutes to walk around your neighborhood after dinner or spending time together gardening. Whenever you have an opportunity to get outdoors, do it – meal times, family gatherings and washing your dog are all opportunities to be outdoors.

Making a goal to spend 120 minutes in nature each week is a good starting point that can set you on a path to increased health and well-being. As researchers noted in Scientific Reports, the benefits of such a simple act can be significant on both an individual and public health level:<sup>24</sup>

*“In terms of magnitude, the association between health, well-being and  $\geq 120$  mins spent in nature a week, was similar to associations between health, well-being and: (a) living in an area of low vs. high deprivation; (b) being employed in a high vs. low social grade occupation; and (c) achieving vs. not achieving recommended levels of physical activity in the last week.*

*Given the widely stated importance of all these factors for health and well-being, we interpret the size of the nature relationship to be meaningful in terms of potential public health implications.”*

**[Read more great articles at mercola.com](https://www.mercola.com)**