5 Health Benefits of Being in Nature

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Time spent in nature has a number of benefits to emotional and physical health – and it doesn't take long to feel the effects

Quick facts

- 10 minutes spent in natural surroundings is enough to help alleviate stress
- Being outside can help sleep by regulating your natural sleep/wake cycle
- Access to nature is beneficial for psychological wellbeing - especially in children

Most of us feel good when we're surrounded by beautiful natural scenery. We instinctively know that being in nature enhances our health, immunity and happiness. Now science proves it. Here are some of the ways that spending more time in natural environments can help benefit your health.

1. Sleep

A recent US study has shown that spending more time outdoors can improve sleep quality. The researchers surveyed over 250,000 people and found that those who spent more time outdoors, most days, had greater levels of physical activity which promoted better sleep. Being outdoors in natural light also helps to reset circadian rhythms which regulate the sleep-wake cycle.

2. Stress levels

If you're feeling stressed a dose of 'nature therapy' can help. In one US study, it was shown that as little as 10 minutes in a natural environment can help you feel happier and lessen the effects of physical and mental stress. Being in a green space causes your brain waves, heart rate and breathing to slow down and blood pressure to drop and this helps you to feel calmer and less stressed.
Meanwhile, other research has found that spending 20-30 minutes in nature three times a week can reduce levels of stress hormones in the body.

3. Mental health – especially for children

Having access to nature is beneficial for psychological wellbeing. A recent Danish study has shown that regular access to greenery may help protect against mood disorders, depression, neurotic behaviour and stress related issues. Evidence suggests that regular exposure to nature in childhood – parks, forests, woodlands and rural settings – may reduces the risk of mental health and psychiatric disorders in adolescence and young adulthood.

4. Mood and wellbeing

According to one study, a 90-minute walk in a natural environment can help lower levels of rumination. This is the 'negative mind chatter', associated with negative mood, depression, stress and anxiety.
For calming benefits, being near the sea has a particular effect. Research shows that spending time by 'blue spaces' such as the sea, river, lake, waterfalls and fountains has many benefits for the mind and body including lowering stress and anxiety, reducing heart rate and blood pressure, slowing the breath and calming the nervous system.

5. Overall health and wellbeing

Those who spend at least two hours in nature a week have better health and psychological wellbeing than those who spent no time in natural environments, research has found. Plus, it didn't matter whether those 120 minutes were spent outdoors all in one go, or broken into shorter visits, the effects were equally beneficial.

How to get more nature into your daily life

Here are some suggestions for ways you can experience more of the health benefits of nature:

- **Gardening:** All that mowing, weeding, digging and planting will work wonders for your fitness levels and being immersed in nature will boost your health and mood too.
- **Cultivate a window box:** If you don't have a garden, get your daily dose of nature by growing plants, flowers and herbs in a window box on a window sill.
- **Walking:** Aim to go for a walk every day. Head for the nearest green space such as your local park, common, river walk or beach walk and try to spend at least 20 minutes walking.

- **Hiking:** Put the stresses of the week behind you by going on a long walk or hike at the weekend.
- **Visit a local beauty spot:** Local landscaped gardens, a waterfall, walk along the river – the choices are vast. In the UK, it costs only £6 a month to join the National Trust for access to acres of national parks and beaches.
- **Play outdoor sports:** Take up a sport that you can do in nature or parks such as tennis, badminton, golf, wild swimming, running or mountain biking.
- **Green Gym:** Check your area for a green gym where you can improve the environment and get fit at the same time, for example by planting trees, doing conservation work, sowing meadows or working on a wildlife pond.