

# Beyond the Walls – How Outdoor Time Transforms Your Health

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## STORY AT-A-GLANCE

- › Spending time outdoors not only allows you to reap the benefits of sunlight, but also allows you to be one with nature, which is good for your mind and body
- › “Nature deficit disorder” refers to the nature deficits that occur due to the urbanized lifestyle that’s rampant today. These include limited access to natural spaces, too much screen time and academic pressures
- › Being psychologically connected to nature is linked to better mental health and a lower risk of turning to medications to ease depression
- › Make sure to get at least an hour of sensible sun exposure, ideally near solar noon, as it exponentially increases the benefits you can get from spending time outdoors

Whenever you’re feeling tired or stressed, your first instinct may be to stay in your room and shut yourself away from the outside world. However, you may find it surprising that doing the opposite – stepping outside and spending time under the sun and immersing yourself in Mother Nature – can be more enjoyable and beneficial than staying within the safety of your walls.

A HuffPost article<sup>1</sup> stresses the importance of going outdoors and highlights four ways it can support your well-being – optimizing your vitamin D levels, reducing stress and anxiety, supporting optimal cognitive function, and improving sleep.

I couldn't agree more, as I believe that spending time outdoors is one of the cornerstones of optimal health. It not only lets you reap the benefits of sunlight (which I'll discuss more later), but also allows you to be one with nature, which can have profound benefits for your mind and body.

## **Most People Are Not Spending Enough Time Outdoors**

Humans are designed to be connected to nature, and breaking this connection opens the door for physical, emotional and mental health disorders. Unfortunately, a significant portion of the population is still not spending enough time outdoors.

According to a survey published in Medium,<sup>2</sup> 58.8% of Americans say they spend one hour or less outdoors daily, while one-third are only getting 30 minutes of outdoor time, or less. Women and young adults in particular are spending more time inside their homes rather than going outside. The article notes:

*"Women are indoors much more than men: 45.4% of women spend 30 minutes a day or less outdoors, compared with only 29.1% of men. They're 64% more likely to go outdoors for 15 minutes a day or less.*

*Young people also spend a lot of time indoors: people aged 18 to 24 years were significantly more likely to spend 30 minutes or less per day outdoors (44.9%) than the rest of the population (31.7%)."*<sup>3</sup>

This lack of outdoor time is described as "nature deficit disorder." Coined by journalist Richard Louv<sup>4</sup> in his book "Last Child in the Woods," this refers to the nature deficits that occur due to the urbanized lifestyle that's rampant today. These include limited access to natural spaces, too much screen time and academic pressures, which all result in reduced outdoor leisure time and more time spent indoors.

Louv states that this human disconnection from nature leads to diminished sensory engagement, attention difficulties, and increased rates of physical and emotional conditions.

## **Spending Time Outdoors Can Significantly Uplift Your Mood**

Going out and spending time in nature allows you to destress and leave your worries behind. According to the HuffPost article,<sup>5</sup> "Natural settings and green spaces are inherently very calming and studies have found that spending time in nature can significantly reduce stress, anxiety and depression."

Visiting green and blue spaces specifically offers significant effects on your well-being. Green spaces include parks and forest preserves, while blue spaces refer to rivers, beaches, lakes and coastal areas.

One study<sup>6</sup> found that visiting these spaces was positively associated with well-being and negatively associated with mental distress. The researchers noted that being psychologically connected to nature was linked to better mental health and a lower risk of turning to medications to ease depression.

In another study,<sup>7</sup> researchers found that senior adults who were able to access parks had better physical and psychological health; blue space users also reported having better health.

However, you don't need to travel far to reap the benefits of the outdoors. If there are no easily accessible beaches or forests in your area, I would suggest simply creating your own green space by starting a garden.

Even the simple act of gardening can have profound benefits — according to one survey, 80% of gardeners in the U.K. reported being "happy and satisfied with their lives," compared to only 67% of nongardeners.<sup>8</sup>

## **Being One With Nature Also Improves Your Cognitive Function**

The HuffPost article<sup>9</sup> also mentions that spending time outdoors can help keep your mind sharp. This is particularly important for children and young adults, whose minds are still developing.

Unfortunately, younger generations are now spending more time indoors with their gadgets, further worsening the disconnectedness from nature. This is why I believe it is crucial that we encourage the youth to spend more time in nature.

*"Interacting with nature can boost your cognitive performance, particularly in areas such as concentration, problem-solving, and creativity. The stimuli provided by natural environments are thought to engage the brain in different and beneficial ways,"* the HuffPost article<sup>10</sup> says.

Being immersed in nature improves cognitive functioning, decreases attention deficit disorder and promotes self-awareness in young people. A study<sup>11</sup> found that young adults who attended a four-week wilderness camp reaped significant benefits. The researchers noted:

*"Nature immersion in a camp setting positively affected the participants' relationship with nature; increased relaxation along with decreased perceived stress; increased positive emotions and decreased negative emotions; increased sense of wholeness and experience of transcendence; and enhanced social interaction."*<sup>12</sup>

## **Why I Disagree With the 20-5-3 Nature Prescription**

One simple guideline for the ideal amount of time to spend in nature is the 20-5-3 nature pyramid.<sup>13</sup> Here's a simple explanation of this concept:

- **20** is at the bottom of the pyramid, and refers to 20 minutes as the recommended amount of time to spend outdoors three times a week. This is said to boost memory, cognitive function and well-being.
- **5** refers to the ideal number of hours to spend in semi-wild nature per month. The recommendation is to visit a state park, which gives you access to a wilder space.
- **3** refers to the number of days that's recommended for you to stay in remote areas of the natural world.

However, I do not advise following this guideline, as it's a feeble attempt to identify the minimum requirement of being outdoors in the sun. I realize that many, even at this astonishing low level, still fail to meet this recommendation. So instead of following the 20-5-3 rule, here's what I recommend – aim to be outdoors for at least an hour a day.

## **Spending Time Under the Sun Optimizes Your Vitamin D Production**

Whether you choose to spend it in green or blue spaces, exploring forests or enjoying the beach, or simply just tending to your outdoor garden, I highly recommend getting at least an hour of sensible sun exposure, ideally near solar noon. This exponentially increases the benefits you can get from spending time outdoors.

Getting regular daily sun exposure has been a passion of mine for several decades. Every one of our ancient ancestors experienced benefits from this activity – it was virtually impossible not to, as the daily necessities of living required them to experience daily sun exposure, not 20 minutes three times a week.

It's best to get your one hour of sun exposure around solar noon to achieve the benefits of UVB rays and near-infrared wavelengths. This will also allow you to optimize your levels of vitamin D, a steroid hormone that's been shown to have a powerful effect on health. Having optimal vitamin D levels helps protect against a wide variety of diseases, including the top causes of mortality, such as:

- **Heart disease** – Cardiovascular disease is the leading cause of death worldwide,<sup>14</sup> which is why optimizing your vitamin D is a crucial step in avoiding this condition. Vitamin D plays a vital role in protecting and repairing damage to your endothelium, which can help manage hypertension and reduce the risk of atherosclerotic heart disease, heart attack and stroke.<sup>15</sup>

Having optimal levels of vitamin D also helps trigger nitric oxide production,<sup>16</sup> which improves blood flow and prevents blood clot formation. It also reduces oxidative stress in your vascular system.

- **Cancer** – Vitamin D can attach to the vitamin D receptor (VDR) in your cells, which sets off a series of signals that may affect how they grow, develop and survive. Through this mechanism of action, vitamin D hinders cell growth in your tissues, helping to control the speed at which cells multiply.<sup>17</sup>

There's mounting evidence showing that vitamin D is a strong ally to combat cancer. With this disease now the second leading cause of mortality worldwide,<sup>18</sup> this just emphasizes the importance of optimizing your levels. For more about this topic, I recommend reading my article, "[More Evidence Showing Vitamin D Combats Cancer.](#)"

- **Neurodegenerative diseases like Alzheimer's disease,<sup>19</sup> Parkinson's<sup>20</sup> and multiple sclerosis (MS)<sup>21</sup>** – Seniors who are severely deficient in this nutrient may have a 125% increased risk of dementia.<sup>22</sup> Having low vitamin D levels in childhood is also associated with an increased risk of MS in adulthood.<sup>23</sup>
- **Diabetes** – According to research,<sup>24</sup> vitamin D supplementation (4,000 IUs/day) along with resistance training helps decrease your waist-to-hip ratio, which is far better at determining your risk for Type 2 diabetes and heart disease than body mass index.

## **Going Outdoors During Daytime Can Help You Get Better Sleep at Night**

While vitamin D production is the most well-known effect related to sun exposure, it's just the tip of the iceberg, as there are several ways sunlight can boost your health. One example is by adjusting your body clock and helping you get high-quality sleep at night. The HuffPost article mentions better sleep as one benefit of spending time outdoors:

*"A 2021 study<sup>25</sup> found that time outside in the morning can improve sleep quality, and, conversely, less time spent outdoors can impair overall sleep quality. Poor sleep can lead to a range of health issues including impacts on mental health and the heart."<sup>26</sup>*

This is because spending time outside in the bright midday sun helps anchor your circadian rhythm. Your pineal gland produces the hormone melatonin when you get bright light exposure during the day and complete darkness at night, which then keeps your rhythm stabilized. This is why I've always warned about decreasing exposure to light, blue light in particular, in the evening, as even the tiniest amount can disrupt your sleep.

Near-infrared light also activates cytochrome c oxidase (CCO),<sup>27</sup> which in turn enhances the production of melatonin in your mitochondria. There's actually an intimate link between sunlight and melatonin. In fact, there are two types of melatonin – circulatory, which is produced by your pineal gland and secreted in the blood, and subcellular, which is made in your mitochondria where it is locally used.

However, both types are connected and controlled by either the absence or presence of sunlight. If you fail to expose your skin to sufficient near-infrared light from the sun, then your mitochondria will have seriously depleted melatonin levels that can't be corrected through supplementation.

## **Sun Exposure Supports Your Health in Myriad Ways**

The rays of the sun actually are a beneficial electromagnetic frequency that is vital for your health in its own right. About 40% of the sun's rays are infrared.<sup>28</sup> These red and near-infrared frequencies have a much longer wavelength, meaning they can penetrate deeper into your body, reaching cells in your subcutaneous tissue and not just on your skin.

Near-infrared cannot be seen but is felt as warmth, and it can penetrate through lightweight clothing. That said, here are just some ways the near-infrared light from sunlight can benefit your well-being:

- **Lowering your risk of high blood pressure** – UVB light produces nitric oxide (NO)<sup>29</sup> and dilates your blood vessels, specifically the capillaries in your skin, which then

directs about 60% of your blood flow there. This then allows the sun's rays to easily penetrate into your blood, where it can help eliminate infections.

- **Modulating genetic expression related to your inflammatory response** – Sunlight also appears to alter genetic expression.<sup>30</sup> Some of these genetic changes can affect your inflammatory responses.
- **Inhibiting infectious diseases** – A study<sup>31</sup> found that exposure to blue and ultraviolet (UV) light increases T cell activity, which are white blood cells involved in immune function.
- **Helping treat seasonal affective disorder (SAD)** – Light therapy has long been the go-to treatment for seasonal affective disorder (SAD),<sup>32</sup> and other research suggests it can be useful in the treatment of major depression as well.<sup>33</sup>

## **You Can Reap More Benefits When You Exercise Outdoors**

There's no doubt that spending time outdoors is one of the fundamental strategies to regain and maintain your health, so whenever you have an opportunity to go outdoors, do it. Include your family, even your young children, in your plans and treat it as a group activity. You can spend time in the park and go on a picnic. If your schedule allows, take time to visit the beach, hike or go on a nature walk.

Another ideal way to boost your health is to exercise outdoors. According to a recent meta-analysis published in the BMJ,<sup>34</sup> several exercises can significantly alleviate symptoms of depression, regardless of severity. The researchers note:

*"In isolation, the most effective exercise modalities were walking or jogging, yoga, strength training, and dancing. Although walking or jogging were effective for both men and women, strength training was more effective for women, and yoga or qigong was more effective for men. Yoga was somewhat more effective among older adults, and strength training was more effective among younger people."*



Most of these activities can be done outdoors, and you can do them by yourself or with a companion. I highly recommend walking, as it's the best form of moderate-intensity exercise there is, in terms of making you fitter and increasing your lifespan. It's also the easiest to incorporate, as you wouldn't need any special equipment – just a comfortable pair of walking shoes.

## Sources and References

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