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Get your chemical fix outdoors



Exercising outdoors has many benefits and maintains an appreciation and respect for nature. And research continues to uncover why we should stay connected with "nature."

You have the benefits of fresh air (depending on where you live), the vitamin D from sunlight, and, surprisingly, the chemicals we are exposed to.

Chemicals? Yes, plants and animals like us humans all benefit from airborne chemicals. Being outdoors and exposed to plants can lower the stress hormone cortisone levels, lower your resting heart rate, and decrease blood pressure. That's partly due to the immune system boost that plants and trees can offer us. Scientists suggest that humans may also benefit from airborne chemicals called phytoncides, which protect plants from fungi, bacteria, and insects. Researchers found those taking long walks in a

forest had a 50% increase in natural killer cells – these cells circulate through the body to kill bacteria, viruses, fungi, and other invaders.

Forest bathing is becoming popular because of this 'chemical' research. Japanese researchers found walking in wooded areas decreased physiological measures such as heart rate and blood pressure. This was recognized after measuring and comparing the brain activity and vital signs of 12 male college students during a walk in a forest versus

a walk in an urban setting. Walking in the forest reduced the oxyhemoglobin concentrations in the brain's prefrontal cortex, which indicates the sympathetic nervous system is relaxed. At the end of the forest walk, blood pressure dropped six points but rose six points during the city walk.

So, how much green time do you need? Not much, say researchers. Ideally, spend as much time as you can outside. But your mental health will benefit with as little as five minutes of exercising in a park, working in a garden, hiking a nature trail, or just sitting among plants. Researchers analyzed 1,252 people of different ages, genders, and mental health states in one study as they walked, gardened, cycled, fished, boated, rode horses, and farmed. More significant health changes occurred in the young and the mentally ill. However, people of all ages and social groups benefited. Any natural environment is ideal, including parks or green areas within cities, but green areas beside water were especially beneficial.

It's not just greenery that promises health benefits. Consider yourself fortunate if you live by a large body of water. Sea air can be energizing and help you sleep better. Sea air is rich in charged negative hydrogen ions, which can neutralize damaging positive ions known as free radicals. As a result, this improves our ability to absorb oxygen, helping us to feel more relaxed and energetic throughout the day. And this can result in sleeping more soundly at night. But whether it's sea air or forest air, being outdoors allows your body to receive more oxygen, which improves your ability to get a good night's sleep.

Any outdoor enthusiast will tell you what science is beginning to investigate: Being outside feels good!

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