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## Why spending time outdoors can improve your health

When it's cold and dark out, it's tempting to stay inside and curl up on the sofa instead of going out for some fresh air. But being outdoors has been shown to lower stress, blood pressure and heart rate, while increasing mood and improving mental health. And whether you're walking, running or pottering in the garden, being outside is increasingly being prescribed by health professionals to improve people's well-being.

If you've ever felt better after going for a walk, you'll know that spending time outside – especially in green spaces – is one of the fastest ways to boost your health and happiness.

"Spending time outdoors is a full sensory experience, which anchors us in the present moment and helps us to feel connected, grounded and a part of something much bigger than ourselves," says [Lee Chambers](#), an environmental psychologist and well-being consultant.

"We get the benefits of sunlight, honouring our circadian rhythm and stimulating serotonin secretion. Being outdoors, we are likely to be moving, which has the ability to elevate our [mood](#)," he says. "We are also likely to be interacting with a natural environment and not bombarded with stimulation, which can lower our cortisol levels and give us pleasant biophilic patterns and colours to focus on."

### Why is being outdoors so good for us?

Physical [exercise](#) is known to release brain chemicals such as endorphins, which help to relieve discomfort and boost our mood. However, research shows that simply being in a green space and reconnecting with nature can do wonders for our health.

In 2022, a study found that a one-hour walk in nature reduces stress more than walking for an hour in a city<sup>1</sup>. Research by King's College London found that exposure to trees, the sky and birdsong helps our [psychological health](#). And it doesn't take long to reap the benefits of the great outdoors either - as little as 10 minutes in a natural setting can help us feel happier and lessen the effects of both physical and mental stress<sup>3</sup>.

In fact, being outdoors is so good for us that the ancient Japanese tradition of 'forest bathing' has become increasingly popular in the West in recent years. Known in Japan as *shinrin yoku*, this simple method of being calm and quiet amongst the trees, observing nature around you and breathing deeply can help us to de-stress in a natural way.

There is also growing evidence that gardening is particularly therapeutic as it combines physical activity with exposure to sunlight and nature<sup>4</sup>.

## **Green Gym**

Many people turn to '[Green Gyms](#)' to pass the time and switch off. Green Gyms are free outdoor sessions run by the UK organisation The Conservation Volunteers, where people are guided in practical conservation activities like planting trees, sowing meadows and establishing wildlife ponds.

Green Gym activities can curb social isolation and give volunteers a sense of achievement and purpose - while allowing them to give back to their communities.

## **A moment of calm**

"Anecdotally, most of us would say being outside just makes us feel calmer, and we know that reduced stress has a significant impact on well-being," says Sally Brown, a [BACP](#)-registered therapist. "Other theories point to the release of specific phytoncides by trees - airborne chemicals that plants emit - which when breathed in have a similar effect to aromatherapy on the body, boosting the immune system.

"There might also be a [mindfulness](#) effect - perhaps we're more likely to pay attention to our surroundings when we are somewhere green and pleasant which takes our focus away from our thinking and worries for a while."

Even the act of moving indoors to outdoors - and experiencing fresh air - can be symbolic to us, says Alivia Rose, psychotherapist and spokesperson from the [UK Council for Psychotherapy](#). Essentially, she explains, being outside allows us to step away from our worries and concerns when we see the wider world.

"It helps us move out of our inner emotional and over-thinking mental life, connecting us more with our bodies," she says. "It helps us change our perspective and sense of well-being, in the realisation that there is a bigger world out here - bigger than our inner more difficult world. It helps shift our introspection."

## How to spend more time outdoors

Not everyone has access to their own private garden to enjoy, but there are plenty of other ways to spend more time outside.

### Try gardening

Gardening is good for us for many reasons. Firstly, gardening is a deeply [mindful](#) activity that requires us to focus and be in the moment, allowing us to let go of worries and stress. Cultivating plants is also a creative outlet that provides satisfaction too. Watching a seed grow into a flower or a plant bearing vegetables is satisfying and rewarding, whether in your own back garden or community garden or getting your hands dirty filling up some window boxes.

"According to the biophilia hypothesis, humans have naturally evolved to spend time in green spaces so we function best close to nature," says Brown. "Gardening means we're very physically close to nature. It's perhaps the ultimate 'grounding' activity. It also feels like a safe space to be outside, especially if you're on your own, taking away any anxiety about who you might meet, what you need to wear or how you look."

If you don't have your own garden, consider joining the estimated 300,000 allotment holders across the UK - while interest and waiting lists have grown, especially since the pandemic, rent is inexpensive and they're available with fairly short waits in some parts of the country. And of course you have the added advantage of joining a like-minded group of enthusiasts who often contribute to a real community spirit.

## Join a 'green gym'

[Green Gyms](#) are a great way to meet other people and learn more about wildlife conservation. Although there is an emphasis on health and fitness, the sessions are suitable for all abilities.

"Green gyms are a structured way to garner the well-being benefits of being outdoors," Chambers says. "It gives us a platform to increase our [confidence](#) by learning new skills. Taking part is a form of exercise and activity that offers the benefits of movement in parallel with the impact of being in a natural environment. They are also fulfilling, as we give something back to nature, we connect with others taking part, and we become enveloped in the task we are carrying out."

## Go walking

[Walking](#) in a green park is a great way to exercise and gain the benefits of being outdoors. Search for routes nearby that take you through green spaces, flowers and trees and try to stay in the moment as you wander. Even a short walk in your lunch break can be enough to boost your mood.

## Join a community gardening club

With many people living in rented accommodation where outdoor space can be a rarity, organisations like the [Federation of City Farms and Community Gardens](#) allow people to track down local horticulture groups.

Community gardening groups and Green Gyms are an increasing option for GPs to socially prescribe to patients – and for good reason. Living close to nature and spending time outside have significant and [wide-ranging health benefits](#), reducing the risk of [type 2 diabetes](#), cardiovascular disease, premature death, [stress](#), and [high blood pressure](#). [Some research](#) even suggests that green space is associated with a lower risk of developing psychiatric disorders.

"Many volunteer groups are doing similar projects across the country, and nature prescriptions continue to gain traction as a great way to achieve a range of well-being benefits while making a difference to our local area," Brown says. "Whether you find your own or go through your GP, just getting started will be a great way to get socially connected and outdoors as the weather changes."

## Further reading

1. [Sudimac et al: How nature nurtures: Amygdala activity decreases as the result of a one-hour walk in nature.](#)
2. [Mechelli et al: Study suggests exposure to trees, the sky and birdsong in cities beneficial for mental wellbeing.](#)
3. [Meredith et al: Spending time in nature reduces stress.](#)
4. [Thompson: Gardening for health: a regular dose of gardening.](#)

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