Health and Wellness Benefits of Spending Time in Nature

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Background
Drawing attention to the benefits of outdoor leisure and recreation for improved health helps shift attention from the downstream costs of health care to the upstream efforts to prevent ill health from occurring. An upstream focus is also empowering, enabling people to play a more prominent role in individual and family wellness. In support of upstream efforts, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC 2009) recommended translating scientific findings into community and school practices to protect the health of people where they live, work, learn, and play. This research effort attempts to do just that.

Potential Deliverables
- Networking with others doing research and community outreach related to this topic
- Publishing a synthesis of information from published literature
- Identifying gaps and additional work needed
- Translating findings into user friendly information
- Developing products and tools that can be used in schools, hospitals, senior centers, doctor’s offices and health centers. The benefits of spending time in nature are not age restricted!

Research Results
Findings reported in the literature show that people who walk 15 to 30 minutes a day are healthier than people who don’t—they have fewer diseases, are less likely to get cancer, have a lower risk of heart attack and stroke, and have better bone density. Walking improves digestion and decreases the risk of intestinal cancer, reduces risk of type II diabetes, and reduces insulin dependency of diabetics. Walking recalibrates energy/fat storage so the body becomes more efficient and trim. Walking helps the kidneys, the lymphatic system, and the joints. It also diminishes some types of arthritis (Hartman 2006). Research at Duke University in 1999 found that a brisk 30-minute walk three times a week was more effective in reducing depression symptoms than Zoloft® alone or Zoloft® and walking, and walkers were less likely to have a recurrence of depression (Hartman 2006).

“Parks and other natural environments are a fundamental health resource, particularly in terms of disease prevention” (Maller et al. 2008). Researchers are demonstrating the positive effects of nature on blood pressure, cholesterol, outlook on life, and stress reduction. It has also prove beneficial to those with attention deficit disorder (Kuo and Taylor 2004). Spending time in nature also has been linked to longevity and decreased risk of mental illness in studies in Scandinavia and the Netherlands (De Vries et al. 2003, Grahn and Stigsdotter 2003).

Health benefits of nature may also have relevance to injury prevention and control, diabetes, asthma, arthritis, musculoskeletal conditions, and other maladies, including
cancer (Li 2009). In Japan, shinrin-yoku or forest bathing is a short, leisurely visit to a forest. A Japanese study of men and women on a 3-day/2-night trip to a forest included short walks each day (Li 2009). Blood and urine samples were tested during and following the trip. Results suggest that a monthly trip in nature could provide maintenance levels of cells that work to prevent cancer generation and development, among other benefits. Breathing in antimicrobial compounds found in the essential oils of trees increases relaxation and improves stress management resulting in increased vitality and less anxiety, depression, and anger. It also may decrease risk of psychosocial-stress-related diseases. There may be opportunities to replicate this work in coastal temperate rainforests in the Pacific Northwest and Alaska.

References


