

5 Reasons to Spend More Time Outside - Even When It's Cold

By Dr. Mercola

Research shows that the average American spends 87 percent of their time in enclosed buildings and 6 percent of their time in enclosed vehicles.¹ That's a total of *93 percent* of your life spent *inside*.

There are a number of reasons why this is unhealthy -- for body, mind, and spirit. For starters, levels of many pollutants concentrate indoors, where levels are often 2 to 5 times higher than typical outdoor concentrations.²

Simply opening your windows to let more fresh air in is actually one of the easiest and most effective ways to help purify your indoor living spaces and decrease your exposure to disease-causing pollutants, mold, and more.

This is a sound strategy to do regularly, even in the winter. Ideally, open two windows on opposite sides of the house for cross ventilation. Keep them open for about ten minutes, as that will exchange most of the air. Of course, do it in the warmest part of the day if it is winter.

Alternatively, you can get more fresh air just by spending more time outdoors – and there are *many* benefits you'll receive by doing this, above and beyond the fresh air. The benefits are so great that you should strive to get outdoors virtually every day – even if it's winter and the temperatures are low.

5 Reasons to Get Outdoors

Thinking of hibernating until spring comes? Resist the urge and get

outside instead. *TIME* recently featured 5 great reasons to do so if you're looking for a bit of extra motivation.³

1. Boost Your Creativity and Focus

If you're trying to solve a problem or come up with a brilliant idea, take a walk outside. One study found walking increased 81 percent of participants' creativity, but walking *outside* produced "the most novel and highest quality analogies."⁴

Among children with ADHD, meanwhile, spending time in nature leads to improvements in focus and higher scores on concentration tests. Richard Louv, in his book *Last Child in the Woods*, even used the term "nature-deficit disorder" to describe behavioral problems he believes stem from spending less time outdoors.⁵

2. Improve Your Mood and Self-Esteem

"Green exercise," which is exercise in the presence of nature, has unique benefits above and beyond indoor exercise. One meta-analysis of 10 studies found that physical activity outdoors for as little as five minutes leads to measurable improvements in mood and self-esteem.⁶

While every "green environment" studied led to these improvements, exercise near water generated the greatest effects. Researcher Jules Pretty from the University of Essex said:⁷

"You get a very substantial benefit from the first five minutes. We should be encouraging people in busy and stressed environments to get outside regularly, even for short bits of time."

Spending time outdoors is also a recommended treatment for Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD), which is sometimes called "winter depression." Outdoor light exposure may help your mood even if it's cold and cloudy. According to the Mayo Clinic:⁸

“Even on cold or cloudy days, outdoor light can help — especially if you spend some time outside within two hours of getting up in the morning.”

I typically walk 90 minutes every day barefoot on the beach around solar noon for vitamin D (unless it is raining) and this really refreshes me. It also allows me to read one book a week.

3. Increase Your Vitamin D Levels

It's estimated that over 95 percent of US senior citizens may be deficient in vitamin D, along with 85 percent of the American public.

Researchers have noted that vitamin D deficiency is prevalent in adults of all ages who have increased skin pigmentation (such as those whose ancestors are from Africa, the Middle East, or India), or who always wear sun protection or limit their outdoor activities.⁹

Increasing your vitamin D levels is important, as researchers have pointed out that increasing levels of vitamin D₃ among the general population could prevent chronic diseases that claim nearly one million lives throughout the world each year. Incidence of several types of [cancer](#) could also be slashed in half.

Vitamin D also fights infections, including colds and the flu, as it regulates the expression of genes that influence your immune system to attack and destroy bacteria and viruses.

I firmly believe that appropriate sun exposure is the best way to optimize your vitamin D levels, and the more time you spend outdoors, the easier it will be for you to naturally [keep your vitamin D levels in the therapeutic range](#) of 50-70 ng/ml.

4. Improve Your Workouts

As mentioned, exercising *outdoors* yields increased benefits over indoor exercise. In addition to boosting your mood, outdoor exercise can be more challenging, leading to greater physical gains. For instance, if you walk, jog, or cycle outdoors, you'll have to expend more energy to overcome wind and changes in terrain.¹⁰

Among older adults (a population that generally tends to spend very little time outdoors), those who exercise outdoors accumulated significantly more physical activity than those who exercised indoors.¹¹ There's even research showing levels of the stress hormone cortisol are lower when people exercise outdoors as opposed to indoors.¹²

5. Healing Potential

There's something inherently healing about spending time outdoors. Part of it has to do with exposure to natural light. One study found people exposed to 46 percent more sunlight after surgery used 22 percent less pain medication per hour.^{13,14}

However, there are likely benefits even beyond the light exposure. Research shows, for instance, that older adults who spend more time outdoors have less pain, sleep better and have less functional decline in their ability to carry out their daily activities.¹⁵ According to research published in *Biopsychosocial Medicine*:¹⁶

“The healing power of nature, vis medicatrix naturae, has traditionally been defined as an internal healing response designed to restore health. Almost a century ago, famed biologist Sir John Arthur Thomson provided an additional interpretation of the word nature within the context of vis medicatrix, defining it instead as the natural, non-built external environment.

He maintained that the healing power of nature is also that associated with mindful contact with the animate and inanimate

natural portions of the outdoor environment. ...With global environmental concerns, rapid urban expansion, and mental health disorders at crisis levels, diminished nature contact may not be without consequence to the health of the individual and the planet itself.”

Kids Would Rather Do Chores Than Play Outside

In the 1970s and ‘80s, kids spent more than two hours outdoors on weekdays and nine hours on weekends, no matter what the weather. In contrast, a 2013 study found children spend just over one hour outdoors on weekdays and about 4.5 hours outside on Saturdays and Sundays.¹⁷ This was about *half* of the time the children’s parents noted playing outdoors when they were kids, which may be why 44 percent of the parents said they wished their children would play outside more often.

The children, in turn, had a long list of activities they said they would rather do than play outside. This included watch TV, play computer games, play with other games and toys, read books, surf the Web... and even do their homework or chores. As noted in *Social Science & Medicine*:¹⁸

“The natural world has long been associated with health and described as a therapeutic landscape, and a growing body of research demonstrates the benefits of interacting with nature for mental and physical health. However, concern is growing that children have lost connection to the natural world and spend less time outdoors, despite the known health benefits of doing so.”

We’re now seeing record rates of childhood obesity, along with increasing rates of type 2 diabetes, asthma, vitamin D deficiency, and ADHD – all of which may be tied to children spending less time in nature engaged in outdoor activity. In fact, a shift toward a sedentary lifestyle and away from active outdoor play has been described as a “major contributor to the

decline in children's health."¹⁹

Grounding: Another Benefit of Spending Time Outdoors

The next time you go outdoors, take off your shoes and spend some time walking barefoot in the grass, sand, or mud. The Earth carries an enormous negative charge. It's always electron-rich and can serve as a powerful and abundant supply of antioxidant and free-radical-busting electrons. Your body is finely tuned to "work" with the Earth in the sense that there's a constant flow of energy between your body and the Earth. When you put your bare feet on the ground, you absorb large amounts of negative electrons through the soles of your feet.

The effect is sufficient to maintain your body at the same negatively charged electrical potential as the Earth. This simple process is called "grounding" or "earthing," and its effect is one of the most potent antioxidants we know of. [Grounding](#) has been shown to relieve pain, reduce inflammation, improve sleep, enhance wellbeing, and much, much more. When you wear rubber or plastic-soled shoes, however, you are effectively shielding yourself from this beneficial influx of electrons from the Earth.

Simply by getting outside, barefoot, touching the Earth, and allowing the excess charge in your body to discharge into the Earth, you can alleviate some of the stress continually put on your system. Walking barefoot can help ameliorate the constant assault of electromagnetic fields and other types of radiation from cell phones, computers, and Wi-Fi. It's also thought that grounding may actually facilitate the formation of [structured water](#) in your body.

Furthermore, grounding also calms your sympathetic nervous system, which supports your heart rate variability. And, when you support heart rate variability, this promotes homeostasis, or balance, in your autonomic nervous system. This is important because anytime you improve your

heart rate variability, you're improving your entire body and all its functions. If you want to learn more, check out the [Grounded documentary](#) (in which I am interviewed). You'll hear first-hand accounts from residents of Haines, Alaska who have overcome chronic pain, sleep apnea, and much more simply by getting outside and becoming grounded.

Tips for Spending Time Outdoors Even in Cold Temperatures

It's easy to schedule a weekend hike or occasional outdoor outing, but to get the most benefits you should strive for time outdoors each and every day, even if it's only for five minutes. To make this happen, outdoor time needs to become a normal part of your (and your child's) routine. And don't let bad weather stop you (within reason, of course). Some of the best times to head outdoors are during a light drizzle, after a big snow, or on a muddy spring day. Parks and trails will be less crowded and you can immerse your senses to explore nature in all of its seasons. Ideas include:

Walk or bicycle to and from work	Walk your child to and from school
Take an afternoon walk (if you have children, do this after school so they can participate, too)	Walk your dog daily
Spend five minutes outside immediately upon waking	Schedule daily outings to parks or playgrounds
Make winter sports a weekly occurrence (skiing, ice skating, sledding, snowshoeing)	

When Is It Too Cold to Go Outside?

This is really a personal decision... but once the thermometer dips down to 20 degrees Fahrenheit (-6.6 degrees Celsius) or so, you'll want to use extreme caution and make sure to protect your skin from exposure if you choose to go outdoors, as such subfreezing temperatures dramatically increase your chances of developing frost bite. Your cheeks, nose and ears

are the most vulnerable, but your hands and feet are also easily affected. Dressing appropriately and paying attention to the following safeguards can help keep you safe and warm when spending time outdoors this winter:

- **Dress in three or more layers:**

1. Use a lightweight synthetic material to wick moisture away from your skin. *Avoid* heavy cotton materials as these absorb sweat, trapping wetness close to your body, which can increase your risk of hypothermia
2. Add another layer or two of wool or fleece for insulating warmth
3. Top it off with a lightweight, water-repellant, and wind-resistant material

- **Wear a hat**, as you lose about 50 percent of your body heat from your uncovered head
- **Wear gloves** to protect your fingers from frostbite. Layering thin gloves with heavier mittens is a good idea so you can remove a layer if needed without exposing your bare skin to the frigid air
- **Cover your face with mask or scarf** when the temperature is below freezing to avoid frostbite. This can also help warm the air a bit before entering your lungs
- **Wear sturdy footwear with good traction** to prevent slips and falls on snow or ice
- **Check the temperature and the forecast.** Health risks increase when the combined temperature and wind chill falls below -20°F
- **Wear light and/or reflective clothing**, as it gets darker sooner during the winter months. You want to make sure drivers can see you
- **Drink plenty of fluids.** Staying properly hydrated is just as important during cold weather as during hot weather. If you're exercising, drink before, during, and after your workout, even if you don't feel very thirsty, as dehydration may be more difficult to notice during cold weather exertion

- **Tell someone where you're going and when to expect your return**, just in case something goes wrong. If you slip and fall in the winter, hypothermia can get the better of you if no one knows to go looking for you

While staying warm is important, a common mistake people make is actually dressing *too warmly* when exercising in cold weather. Remember that exercise will generate body heat and sweating, even though it's cold outside. And once your sweat starts to accumulate in your clothes, it can have a significantly chilling impact. If it's really cold outside, it may even end up freezing close to your skin, which can lower your body temperature and increase your risk of hypothermia.

Staying DRY is equally important as being warm—hence the importance of putting on a wicking layer closest to your skin, and dressing in layers so you can remove a layer or two if you're sweating profusely. Just remember to put those layers back on once you begin to cool down. Keep in mind that wind chill can make exercising risky even if you dress warmly. As a general suggestion, I'd recommend taking a break from outdoor activities if the temperature dips well below 0 degrees Fahrenheit (-17.8 C), or if the wind chill factor is high.