

What can nature do for your health?

Your health, both physical and mental, is affected by the environment you live in. By spending more time in greenspaces, just having fun in nature, you can experience a number of health benefits.





Getting out in the sun helps keep your teeth and bones healthy

You've probably heard that you get Vitamin D from exposure to the sun. But did you know that sunlight coming through a window pane doesn't produce any Vitamin D at all? Or even what our bodies need Vitamin D for?

Sunlight contains ultraviolet radiation, including a particular type called ultraviolet B (UVB). UVB radiation from the sun reacts with cholesterol in your skin and allows your body to synthesise Vitamin D. Your body uses this vitamin to regulate the amount of calcium and phosphate in your system. By regulating these minerals, Vitamin D takes an essential role in keeping your teeth, bones and muscles healthy. A deficiency in Vitamin D can lead to deformities like rickets in children and conditions like osteomalacia in adults.

Between March and the end of September you can get all the Vitamin D you need by spending a short period outdoors each day with your forearms, hands or lower legs uncovered. You won't get too much Vitamin D from spending too long in the sun, but always remember to regularly apply sunscreen (minimum 30 SPF) to all exposed areas.

Sunlight coming through a window doesn't help you produce Vitamin D, as the UVB radiation needed is blocked by the glass. During the winter months, and any period that you're unable to spend time outdoors, you may need to find alternative sources of Vitamin D. Certain foods can be a good source, like oily fish, red meat, egg yolks and some cereals. If necessary you can also increase your level of Vitamin D with dietary supplements.

Forget super-foods, try super-fields

In July 2018, a report published by the University of East Anglia's Norwich Medical School claimed that exposure to greenspace reduced the risk of a wide range of medical conditions - including type II diabetes, cardiovascular disease, premature death, preterm birth, stress and high blood pressure.

The report gathered evidence from 140 studies conducted all around the world, with data collected from more than 290 million people. It defined greenspace as open, undeveloped land with natural vegetation as well as urban greenspaces, which included urban parks and street greenery.

The link between exposure to greenspace and these health benefits isn't fully understood yet. It makes sense to think that people living closer to greenspaces have more opportunities for exercise. It's also hypothesised that spending more time outside exposes us to a diverse variety of bacteria, which helps improve our immune system.





Greenspaces are a sanctuary from stress

Spending time in nature is gaining recognition as an effective way to reduce symptoms of stress and anxiety. Walking, or even just sitting outdoors, can have a meditative effect and help us stay calm and improve our mood.

Spending time on a beach, in a forest, or in a park is an effective way to separate yourself from the things that cause you stress, both physically and mentally. Physically, you can put some distance between you and the things that may cause stress or distractions in your life. No ringing phones, or emails to answer or chores to finish. It works best if you turn off your phone or any mobile devices while there, or don't even bring them.

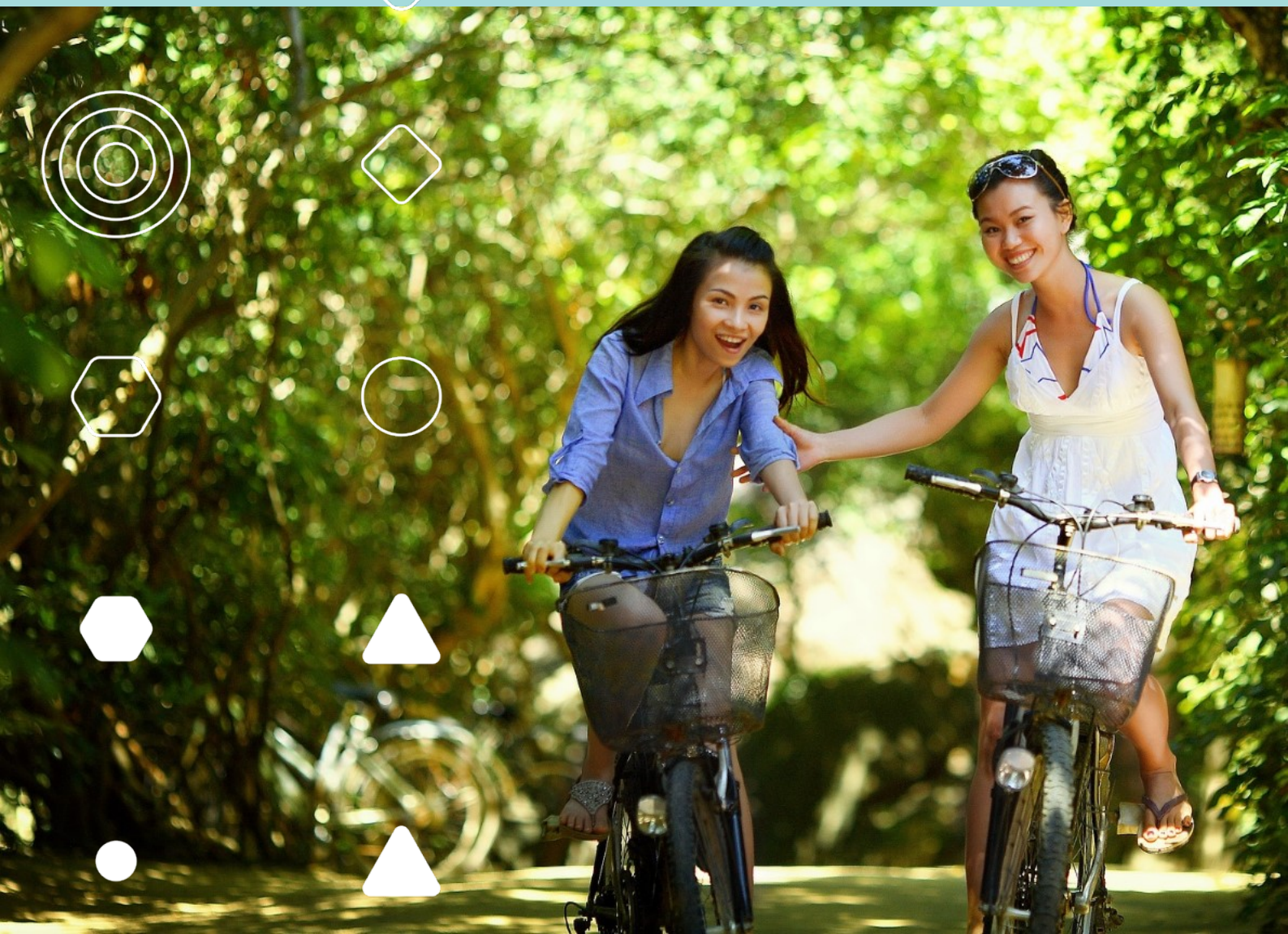
Greenspaces offer an excellent opportunity to practice the principles of Mindfulness. Mindfulness requires you to be present, focussing on the sensations you can experience in that moment, without judgement or distraction. Being outside expands Mindfulness beyond the meditations you may already be familiar with. You can focus on the parts of nature you may not always notice – the sound of wind passing through leaves, the smell of pine needles or the shifting sensation of walking through sand.



The ideal space to be active

Greenspaces are essential to sports and activities. How many of us spent hours outside playing football or running as children? These natural spaces also have several great advantages over gyms and leisure centres, the first, most obvious one, being that they're free!

Greenspaces also keep exercise casual, and allow us total control of when and how we get active. An impromptu kick about in the park isn't dictated by a leisure centre's timetable. If you want to keep moving and playing, there's no one telling you to leave before you're ready. Getting outdoors also gives you the most freedom of choice. You can choose any exercise you want, from a gentle walk, to cycling, to even swimming. All you need to consider is if your greenspace is appropriate for your activity. You might struggle to throw a Frisbee in a dense forest.





Natural spaces help nurture healthy habits in the whole family

Going out into nature is a great way to keep the whole family active. It's a cheap alternative to a family gym or leisure centre membership and it's easy to always keep it new and interesting.

Children love to discover something new and explore a new place. Taking children to a greenspace they haven't visited before is an effective way to get them moving, especially if it's a spot with lots of things to investigate – like fallen trees, streams, ponds or sand dunes. Even in a familiar setting, like your local park, you can refresh the experience for children with some simple games, like a scavenger hunt. You could even sneak some learning into the game by asking children to find particular plants or natural features.

It isn't all just about children either. Just by taking children outside, parents and guardians already receive some of the health benefits of being in nature. By choosing the correct places, parents can also be active outdoors, even if they don't want to, or can't, join in with the children's games. In a greenspace with lots of good visibility, like an open playing field, parents can enjoy walking, jogging, or practicing outdoor yoga, while keeping children safely within sight and reach.

Families develop habits together. If a parent is concerned with the amount of screen time a child has, a great way to help is to lead by example. If children see adults enjoying time away from screens they're encouraged to emulate that behaviour and change their habits.