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THE MAGAZINE FOR COSTCO MEMBERS

Natural remedy

Discover the many health
benefits of regular doses
of being outside 34



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Nature's nurture

Walking, hiking, swimming and cycling all provide physical benefits. But did you know that simply spending time outdoors—no matter where you live—can also have a huge impact on your overall well-being? We gathered expert insights and tips to help you reap the benefits of health-building nature experiences.

by **Wendy Helfenbaum**

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A variety of items to make the most of your time outside—activewear, outdoor chairs, sunblock and more—are available in Costco warehouses and at Costco.com.

C

ostco member Misty Pratt struggled with anxiety and depression for many years until she finally found respite and relief—in the woods. Pratt discovered the restorative powers of nature about 10 years ago when she and her husband, Tom Stacey, moved into a home that backed onto a ravine.

During short walks in the woods—first with her children and then alone—Pratt, a research coordinator at Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario in Ottawa, Ontario, noticed her breathing growing relaxed and the tension in her body melting away. Now she gets out for a walk every morning for 45 minutes.

"Taking deep breaths of fresh air, I was able to let it all go; walking calms

my brain. It's mindfulness—you're able to focus on the steps or breaths you're taking," she says. "I've seen foxes, coyotes, rabbits, beavers and a snowy owl; there's something special about connecting with living things."

Time well spent

Many of us spend too much time indoors in front of a screen or other electronic devices. To offset this, health care experts say getting some "vitamin N"—for nature—can reduce stress and insomnia, boost energy and revitalize health. A growing body of research links exposure to nature with therapeutic benefits. For example, researchers at the University





of Michigan recently examined the effects of experiences in nature.

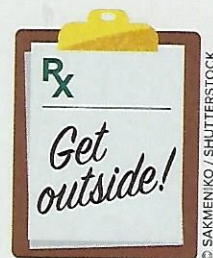
"We've known for decades that being in the presence of nature has a positive effect on people, but it was unclear how much exposure to nature was needed or what constituted a health-building nature experience," says the study's lead author, Costco member MaryCarol Hunter, an associate professor at the university's School for Environment and Sustainability.

During the study's eight-week experiment, participants spent at least 10 minutes, three times a week, connecting with nature in some way, such as listening to birds from a balcony, sitting under a tree or walking a park trail. Saliva tests were analyzed for

cortisol—the body's stress hormone—before and after the nature experience. Published in *Frontiers in Psychology*, Hunter's work showed that a 20-minute "nature pill" provided the most reduction in stress hormones.

Other research confirms that any exposure to nature is good for you. For example, a 2019 study in *Scientific Reports* revealed that spending two hours a week in nature promotes good physical and mental health, no matter what outdoor activity you do. Another 2019 study, in Denmark, showed that adolescents who didn't spend time in green space were up to 55% more likely to develop depression and anx-

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A prescription for outdoors

Park Rx America (parkrxamerica.org) is a nonprofit organization whose mission is to decrease the burden of chronic disease, increase health and happiness, and foster environmental stewardship. Here are a few statistics from the organization that connect health with outdoors:

- Time in nature decreases anxiety and negative thinking and lowers levels of depression and stress.
- Outdoor activity improves both mental and physical well-being more than indoor activity.
- Time in nature helps to decrease high blood pressure.
- Diabetics who spend more time in nature are more physically active and show better blood sugar control.
- Time in nature is associated with better cognitive development in schoolchildren.
- The closer you are to green space, the less you suffer from cardiovascular, musculoskeletal, mental health, respiratory, neurological and digestive diseases.—WH

ILLUSTRATIONS: © GOODSTUDIO / SHUTTERSTOCK

Finding vitamin N

These organizations will help you explore the many benefits of being outside:

Park Rx America has an interac-

tive park finder (parkrxamerica.org).

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention Healthy Places has links to a wide variety of resources (cdc.gov/healthypaces/healthtopics/parks_resources.htm).

National Wildlife Federation promotes programs that connect kids to nature (nwf.org/Kids-and-Family/Connecting-Kids-and-Nature).

—WH



"If you have to start with opening a window ... that's OK."

— DR. ROBERT ZARR ★

ity later in life. Even five minutes spent looking at green space through a window is beneficial, according to a 2013 study.

A prescription for parks

The back-to-nature movement has gained momentum across North America since 2013, when a conservation program organized by the Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy

partnered with recreation and health care communities to promote parks for improving physical and mental health. Today, organizations like Park Rx America (parkrxamerica.org) are raising awareness of the power of nature to decrease chronic disease.

Dr. Robert Zarr, a primary care physician and pediatrician in the Washington, D.C., area, founded Park Rx America in 2017. When he pulls out his prescription pad, he's often not scribbling down the name of a medi-

Time in nature

Information provided by the National Institutes of Health, *Frontiers of Psychology*, Nature.com, PLOS ONE and Semantic Scholar identify these timely benefits of nature:

Ten minutes of gardening or a weekly visit to a public garden can alleviate depression.

Twenty minutes spent hiking among trees, bird-watching or pursuing other activities in nature reduces cortisol, the stress hormone.

Thirty minutes of sitting or walking in a park setting can lower blood pressure and heart rate.

Forty-five minutes or more of hiking in the mountains results in less fatigue and higher alertness than the same amount of time spent indoors on a treadmill.

Sixty minutes spent interacting with nature, such as walking in urban parks or on tree-lined streets, can boost memory and attention span by 20%.—WH





cation but instead a custom-designed plan to soak up some vitamin N. And Park Rx America has about 10,000 parks and more than 1,000 health care providers registered in its prescribing platform.

"When you have patients with chronic disease or risk factors, you should consider a nature prescription as part of your tool kit," says Zarr. "You have an improvement in mental health outcomes, increased focus and concentration, a decrease in behavioral problems in children, improved diabetic outcomes and a decrease in blood pressure.

"It's well documented that outdoors you're more likely to move, and physical inactivity is an independent risk factor for poor health," he continues. "I think our bodies and minds are geared to be outdoors, and an absence of that in our lives leads to most people telling you they don't feel well."

However, he cautions, "One size does not fit all. Not everybody can walk for 20 minutes every day. If you have to start with opening a window, or looking out a window onto a tree, or you have a tiny balcony with a plant on it and you're doing jumping jacks, that's OK. Just start somewhere."

Spreading the message

Healthy By Nature, a program launched through the BC Parks Foundation in West Vancouver, British Columbia, last November, encourages people to venture outside. The initiative partners with community organizations to provide outdoor activities and sports for youths and families.

Dr. Melissa Lem, a Vancouver-based family physician, heads up the Park Prescriptions program within



Healthy By Nature. "What's great about our nature prescriptions program is that it doesn't matter what your physical abilities are; the health benefits of nature are accessible to almost anyone, no matter where you live," she says. "You can almost always find a tree or a park somewhere. It doesn't have to be on the side of a mountain peak or in the middle of old-growth rain forest."

While experts recommend 20-minute nature experiences totaling two hours a week, Lem suggests integrating nature and extra physical activity into your lifestyle so it becomes routine.

"I hope our initiative creates a culture change within health care to make people recognize that nature is one of the four pillars of health, along with diet, exercise and sleep," says Lem. "I'd like to see nature prescribed to patients for health benefits on a large scale so it's recognized as essential." ■

Costco member Wendy Helfenbaum is a Montreal-based writer and TV producer.

Need inspiration?

Here are some ideas to get you outdoors—solo or with kids, grandkids and friends—from the National Association for the Education of Young Children (naeyc.org), hikeitbaby.com and popsugar.com:

- Grab a jump-rope • "Camp" in your yard • Try geocaching (geocaching.com) • Sketch some wildlife • Go fishing
- Plant some flowers • Stargaze • Play hopscotch
- Join a folksport group (ava.org) • Take up archery • Go metal detecting • Read a book outside • Play disc golf
- Window-shop • Try birding (audubon.org/birding) • Bury a time capsule • Play flashlight tag • Volunteer for a park or beach cleanup (volunteermatch.org) • Watch a sunrise/sunset • Take a dog for a walk
- Fly a kite

—T. Foster Jones

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