

How walking in the woods benefits your health

October 13, 2017 **Jaymi Heimbuch**

Walking among trees makes us more relaxed, nicer people.

It should come as no surprise that walking among trees has health benefits. *Shinrin-yoku* or "forest bathing" is a Japanese practice that celebrates the health-improving qualities of the forest.

"[S]tudies have confirmed that spending time within a forest setting can reduce psychological stress, depressive symptoms, and hostility, while at the same time improving sleep and increasing both vigor and a feeling of liveliness," reports Mother Earth News. "These subjective changes match up nicely with objective results reported in nearly a dozen studies involving 24 forests—lower levels of cortisol and lower blood pressure and pulse rate."

A 2017 study published in *Scientific Reports* considered the mental health benefits of living near forests for city dwellers, especially those coping with stress. Those participants involved in the study who lived within half a mile of a forest were more likely to show signs of a healthy amygdala, the part of the brain associated with, among other things, regulating stress. The researchers point out that the effects on the amygdala were more pronounced in participants near a forest than they were with participants who had easier access to urban greenery, such as parks. The size of a forest and its distance away from the hustle and bustle of the city likely played a part in reducing stress when compared to the effects of urban greenery.

Just the smell of trees has health benefits. "Chemicals secreted by trees, known as phytoncides, have been linked with improved immune defense as well as a reduction in anxiety and increase in

pain threshold," reports Slate in an article on the health benefits of nature. Studies have also shown that children with ADHD who play in a green outdoor environment, rather than an indoor or constructed environment, show a decrease in their symptoms. Even just living around more trees means a healthier overall mental state. A 2015 study showed that Londoners who live near trees take fewer antidepressants.

Of course, being in a forest also means there's a certain amount of exercise going on. Exercise is a proven solution for many ailments including fatigue, depression, anxiety and of course obesity. Combining the benefits of movement with the benefits of a forest setting is an extra-strong prescription for many health issues.

If there is one good thing you're going to do for yourself today, perhaps it should be heading out the door to go take a walk in a forest or a tree-lined park.

This story has been updated with new information since it was originally published in April 2015.