

OPTIMAL HEALTH UNIVERSITY™

Presented by Steven L. Smith, DC

This Earth Day, Nurture Your Health Through Nature

Earth Day is a wonderful opportunity to take steps to improve how we care for the environment. Dr. Smith encourages patients to make an “Earth Day Resolution.” Even minor changes, such as planting a tree or recycling a type of material you aren’t currently recycling, will produce a dramatic benefit over the long term.

Earth Day is also the perfect time to incorporate more green exercise into your fitness routine. Green exercise is any workout or physical activity — such as hiking or gardening — that occurs in an outdoor, natural environment or indoor space where elements like potted trees and plants are plentiful.

Dr. Smith explains that the benefits of outdoor exercise — surrounded by nature — surpass those associated with indoor exercise. While both strengthen bodies and lift spirits, exercising outdoors substantially increases the happiness and self-esteem quotient.

As a provider of holistic health care, Dr. Smith believes in caring for the whole person. This means acknowledging the connection between mind, body and spirit. To consider one without the other goes against the *chiropractic lifestyle*, a philosophy that encourages preventing disease through



proper exercise, nutrition and chiropractic care. That’s why Dr. Smith supports the holistic nature of green exercise.

Not Just a Theory

To measure the physical and mental effects of green exercise, researchers in the United Kingdom divided a group of 100 volunteers into five sub-groups of 20 each. The researchers exposed four of the groups to a sequence of 30 scenes projected on a wall while they ran on a treadmill: either pleasant rural, unpleasant rural, pleasant urban or unpleasant urban. The fifth group ran without watching any scenes.

Exercise alone significantly reduced blood pressure, increased self-esteem and boosted the fifth group’s moods. But the 40 volunteers who exercised while watching pleasant, outdoor images had a significantly greater jump in self-esteem than the exercise-only group (*Int J Environ Health Res* 2005;15:319-37).

How to Get Your Green Exercise

You don’t have to become a mountain climber to reap the benefits of green exercise. Think outside the box — the ideas below will get you started.

Join a Green Team

Want to multiply the advantages of green exercise? Then become part of a green team!



Research shows that people who participate in conservation projects report even greater health rewards because they feel connected to something of significance. “Such projects can help overcome social isolation, develop skills and improve employment prospects, as well as provide the known benefits associated with exercise.” (*BMJ* 2005;331:1221-2.)

Include Animals

Boost the health benefits of your green exercise by including some wildlife watching — or bring your own along.

In tightly controlled studies, exposure to wild animals — such as squirrels, owls and raccoons — has shown a therapeutic effect on children with emotional and behavioral problems, according to researchers in the United Kingdom.



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“Although initial research has been promising, the UK needs robust health-impact assessments of wildlife projects to determine their objective therapeutic value.” (*BMJ* 2005;331:1221-2.)

Several studies also show that interacting with domestic pets boosts mental and physical health. The companionship of a dog, for instance, is an enriching experience. At the same time, daily walks boost your — and Fido’s — physical health (*Health Promot J Austr* 2005;16:15-9).

Get Gardening

Gardening is excellent exercise and a fantastic way to merge your green thumb with green exercise.

“Cultivation of a garden plot offers a simple way of harnessing the healing power of nature,” say researchers in the United Kingdom. “One implication of this is that gardens and gardening activity may offer a key site of comfort and a vital opportunity for an individual’s emotional, physical and spiritual renewal.” (*Soc Sci Med* 2004;58:1781-93.)

For older adults who suffer from age-related mobility issues, the researchers note that communal gardening provides a way to benefit not only from nature, but also from building relationships. “By enhancing the quality of life and emotional well-being of older people, we maintain that communal gardening sites offer one practical way in which it may be possible to develop a ‘therapeutic landscape.’”

You can also reap the benefits of outdoor gardening by growing houseplants and tending window-sill herb gardens.

Bring the Outside In

What if you don’t have access to nature trails and other green spaces — or the weather does not permit outdoor activities? Research shows that the mind-body benefits of green exercise can be achieved indoors, provided workout areas include natural elements like trees, flowers and scenic murals (*Int J Environ Health Res* 2005;15:319-37).

Nature and the Mind

Nature has an undisputedly positive impact on well-being, stress management, social integration and cognitive functioning. And scientific research confirms this impact.

In one study, children who moved from nongreen environments to homes with trees, flowers and other natural elements exhibited dramatic improvements in their cognitive functioning (*Hum Eco* 2002;30:7).

Read on for more evidence of nature’s positive effect on the mind.

Additional Benefit for Children

Research also shows that exposure to natural environments buffers the force of daily stress on children.

A study of 281 third- to fifth-grade students reveals that “children living in ‘low nature’ settings — measured by the visibility of nature around the home, the composition of the yard and how many plants were in the house — experienced a much sharper increase in psychological distress as stressful events increased.” (*Hum Eco* 2002;30:7.)

Adventure Therapy

Nature’s effect on children is so powerful, it spawned a new form of therapy — adventure therapy (AT).

In AT, health professionals and adolescents explore wilderness areas together. The goal, according to researchers from the University of Toronto, Canada, is to enhance each adolescent’s self-concept as part of his or her overall physical, cognitive, emotional, spiritual, social, psychological and developmental rehabilitation (*J Pediatr Oncol Nurs* 2004;21:103-10).

Ecopsychology

Another product of the powerful mind/nature link, ecopsychology focuses on reconnecting patients to nature to help them achieve inner peace and balance.

“When highly stressed people are asked to visualize a soothing scene, nobody imagines a freeway or a shop-

ping mall. Rather, images of wilderness, forest, seascape and starry skies invariably emerge. In taking such experiences seriously, ecopsychologists are broadening the context of mental health to include the natural environment.” (*Psychol Today* 1996;29:22.)

According to researchers from the University of Michigan, interaction with nature enriches multiple dimensions of health. “Physiological effects of stress on the autonomic nervous system are lessened,” and deficits in attention can “be restored or minimized. People report feeling greater satisfaction with a variety of aspects of life.” (*Altern Ther Health Med* 2002;8:76-83.)

Go Chiropractic, Go Green!

Make a commitment today to incorporate more “green” in your life. Regardless of age or ability, go outside and play! And don’t forget to make regular appointments with our chiropractic office: the all-natural way to good health.



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