

It turns out your parents were right when they told you to go play outside. Employers would likely be well-served to give the same direction to workers, along with both the means and the flexibility to do so.

That's because spending time in green space has a multitude of physical and mental health benefits and can even improve productivity, said Jay Maddock, Ph.D., who is a professor and co-director of the Center for Health and Nature at Texas A&M University in College Station, Texas. Maddock recently was a presenter during the International Foundation's Art & Science of Health Promotion Conference and is a member of the conference planning committee. "The more we look into it, the more we find the myriad of beneficial effects of nature," he said.

The most obvious benefits of spending time outside are stress relief and lower cortisol levels. "Also, a weekend in nature actually increases the presence of natural killer cells, which are immune cells that fight off cancer," he added. "Nature is linked to decreases in all causes of mortality, and people live longer if they live in a neighborhood that has a lot of green space."

Besides those health benefits, Maddock said research shows that spending 15 minutes in nature renews a person's ability to pay attention and to make fewer mistakes at work.

Even small doses are helpful. For example, he cited a study that showed that patients who had hospital rooms with a view of green space got discharged earlier and had less postoperative pain and complications than those who did not.

An activity like spending a week in a national park has the big health effects, while the smaller doses—like daily outdoor walks—help with mood and stress. The problem is that more than half of people in the United States spend less than five hours a week outside, which means they're getting very little exposure to nature, he explained.

Nature needs to be integrated into people's lives to help them overcome the barriers, which can include lack of time, bad weather, concerns about safety and poor accessibility. "I think a lot of times we haven't thought about integrating nature into workspaces. It's a low priority," Maddock said. A worker might have an interior cubicle and eat lunch in a windowless breakroom, thus spending an entire day without a look at the outdoors.

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Employers have the power to change that behavior.

Strategies include encouraging walking meetings, creating a dedicated green space or garden outside the office, and holding events outside. Another idea is to bring a food truck to the worksite to lure people outdoors for tasty food and fresh air. Creating awareness of the benefits of nature is another important step.

Employers that lack access to green space can buy potted plants for employees to put on their desks (Maddock suggested hard-to-kill succulents). Virtual reality is another possibility—Maddock said taking a walk through nature using virtual reality glasses has been shown to have many of the same benefits as a nonvirtual trek in the woods.

Nature also can be incorporated into wellness programs. Employers could create a challenge that encourages workers to do one small nature-related activity every day for a month, like looking for a butterfly, going on a nature scavenger hunt or changing their screensaver to a nature scene.

Most people intuitively recognize the benefits of nature, Maddock said. "They know it's good for them, but no one thinks about how this actually has a huge impact on their health."

