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Time spent in “green” places linked with longer life in women

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I go to nature to be soothed and healed, and to have my senses put in order. – John Burroughs

Can we make humans healthier by growing healthier places? A 2016 analysis found that women living in areas with higher levels of green vegetation had lower rates of mortality. Researchers at the Harvard School of Public Health conducted a nationwide study of approximately 100,000 women from the Nurses’ Health Study. Those women that had homes in areas with the highest level of greenness in the surrounding 250 meters (roughly 820 feet, or a little over 1/10 of a mile) had a 12% lower rate of death compared to the women whose homes had the lowest level of greenness. Specifically, there was a 13% lower rate for cancer mortality, 35% lower respiratory disease-related mortality, and 41% lower rate for kidney disease mortality in the women living in the areas with the highest levels of green vegetation.

Just how does being in green spaces increase longevity?

When trying to figure out just how the greenness was protecting women against death, researchers found a combination of factors that came into play. These included lower levels of depression, increased social engagement, higher levels of physical activity, and lower levels of pollution. There are probably many reasons why being in green spaces might decrease depression. Perhaps people who live in greener areas are more likely to go outside. Exposure to sunlight helps people to make vitamin D, and low levels of vitamin D are associated with depression. Spending time with friends and participating in social activities were also associated with greener areas, and these things can decrease feelings of loneliness and depression. Being outside and experiencing nature has been known to increase feelings of well-being. In fact, some research suggests that even images of nature can lead to increased positive mood.

Exercise is medicine, and the more physically active a person is, the more fit they will be and the healthier they will be. Green spaces invite people to enjoy the outdoors and encourage people to walk, bicycle, or jog for physical activity. When the space around a home is green and full of vegetation, there are likely paths or trails that are in safe and beautiful places. In this study, those women that lived in greener spaces were more physically active.

Living among trees, plants, grass, and flowers provides an environment with less pollution than one with low levels of vegetation. The plants can reduce levels of nitrogen dioxide and particulate matter, which lowers the level of pollution. In this study, death from respiratory disease was reduced by about one third in those women who lived in the homes with the highest amount of vegetation. Breathing clean air matters, and plants help to clean the air.

Take advantage of green spaces

If you live in an area with heavy vegetation, this is good news for you. Take the opportunity to improve your health. Get outside and breathe the clean air, walk around the neighborhood, find some friends to walk with you, and enjoy the great, green outdoors. If you do not live in an area with a lot of greenery around you, consider planting some trees, plants, or shrubs. If you live in a highly urban area, you can get involved with local policy to work to encourage your community to increase green spaces. Spend time with friends who live in areas with lots of trees and greenery, consciously seek out green areas as often as you can, and consider vacationing in areas with lots of vegetation.

And for those of us still in the throes of winter... spring isn't all that far away.



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