Let Mother Nature Nurse You to Good Health

By Gayle Shirley
Lewis and Clark Public Health

My calendar tells me that today is the first day of spring. The view outside my window begs to differ.

Fortunately, I know that under all that dingy snow and ice, Mother Nature is getting ready to dress the landscape in shades of yellow-green. As a gung-ho gardener, my spirits soar on my faith in nature’s promise.

Green Is Good for You

A growing body of research is finding that my mood isn’t the only thing Mother Nature can improve.

There’s a lot of evidence to show that connecting with nature makes us healthier as well as happier. Yep, that’s right! Green is good for you! Even a glimpse of nature from a window can help.

If you don’t believe me, here’s how David Strayer, a researcher at the University of Utah, summed it up in a 2016 interview: “We are seeing changes in the brain and changes in the body that suggest we are physically and mentally more healthy when we are interacting with nature.”

A study last year at the University of East Anglia in England went a step farther. It concluded that exposure to nature reduces the risk of type II diabetes, heart disease, premature death, preterm birth, stress, and high blood pressure. The researchers gathered evidence from more than 140 studies involving more than 290 million people from 20 countries to come to that conclusion.

The team analyzed how the health of people with little access to nature compared to that of people with lots of exposure.

“We found that spending time in, or living close to, natural greenspaces is associated with diverse and significant health benefits,” one study author said. “People living closer to nature had reduced diastolic blood pressure, heart rate, and stress. In fact, one of the really interesting things we found is that
exposure to greenspace significantly reduces people’s level of salivary cortisol – a physiological marker of stress.”

**Meaningful Impacts**

While you might think people who spend more time in nature are just more physically active, that appears to be only a piece of the puzzle. In Japan, researchers studied people who walked in forests (a cornerstone of Japanese preventive health care known as *shinrin-yoku*, or forest bathing) and compared their heart rates to people who walked in urban settings. They concluded that there’s something about being in nature that reduces stress beyond what you’d expect from exercise alone.

Other research suggests that bacteria-fighting oils released by plants and trees could explain at least some of their health-boosting properties. These compounds are what give forests their fresh aroma – a form of aromatherapy, if you will. And studies suggest they improve immune function.

“Exposure to health-promoting environments is increasingly recognized as both preventing and helping treat disease,” said another of the British study’s co-authors. “Our study shows that the size of these benefits can be enough to have meaningful clinical impact.”

**Nature Deprivation**

All this evidence has led some scientists to suggest that the current epidemic of depression and anxiety in our society could be related to “nature deprivation.” People are spending less time outside and more time indoors and online. In fact, the National Institutes of Health say Americans spend a whopping 90 percent of their time indoors.

So what are we to conclude from all this research into nature and health? According to the best available evidence, spending time in nature shows promise in addressing a range of health challenges, including many that are public health priorities, like obesity, heart disease, depression, and anxiety.

“Nature contact offers promise both as prevention and as treatment across the life course,” University of Washington researchers wrote in a 2017 report. “Potential advantages include low costs relative to conventional medical interventions, safety, practicality, not requiring dispensing by highly trained professionals, and multiple co-benefits. Few medications can boast these attributes.”

So the good news is this: the joys of spring really are just around the corner. And stepping outside may be one of the easiest things you can do to improve your health. Just don’t forget the sunscreen!