

## Visiting a park could save your life, scientists say

**City dwellers should visit parks more often and take advantage of this free and easy way to boost their physical and mental health, environmental scientists have urged.**



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New research from the National Environmental Research Program's Environmental Decisions Hub (NERP's EDH) shows that despite the abundance of parks in Australian cities, only 60 per cent of the urban population are using these facilities in any week.

This means that 40 per cent of us are missing out on the vast array of health benefits that parks offer, including a lower risk of developing heart disease, stress, anxiety and depression, says Dr Danielle Shanahan of NERP EDH and the University of Queensland (UQ).

'In spite of increasing urbanisation, Australian cities are filled with parks,' says Dr Shanahan. 'Governments spend hundreds of millions each year creating and maintaining them, and houses built near them have a higher selling price. Australia clearly values its green spaces.'

Dr Richard Fuller of NERP EDH and UQ says that research worldwide continues to discover the health benefits of being in nature. 'For example, spending ten minutes in a park every day – even when we're not exercising in it – has been shown to lower our blood pressure.'

Another study based in China found that a person's stress was significantly reduced after they exercise in a forest, compared with indoors. Related research in Switzerland also showed that exercising in parks reduces stress-induced headaches – the effect was the same if the person exercised in a forest.

People who visit local parks also feel more connected to their community, Dr Shanahan says.

‘With all these health benefits, parks have enormous potential to reduce Australia’s healthcare costs,’ she says.  
‘Depression alone costs Australia more than \$12.6 billion each year as well as the massive human cost – if visiting parks can help reduce depression even by one percent, that’s a huge gain for Australians.

‘This is why we’re urging more people to spend more time outdoors – having 40 per cent of the urban population missing out is significant, especially when parks are widely available in our cities.’

The Brisbane-based study reveals that frequent park visitors make longer visits, spend much more time in their yards, and often travel further to green spaces than less frequent park users. They are also slightly younger and have a higher level of formal education.

‘Research in other countries has shown that people who live in disadvantaged areas often have less access to parks, and this could be one of the reasons some people visit them less. But that’s not the case in Australia,’ says Dr Shanahan.  
‘We actually found that the affinity of Australians towards nature, instead of just the availability of parks, determines how much time we spend with nature.’

The next challenge is to understand how and why people have higher or lower levels of nature orientation, as this is clearly linked to the health benefits that we can gain from it, she says.

Dr Fuller says this shows that simply creating more parks in cities won’t necessarily encourage people to visit them:  
‘Cities and local councils need to raise people’s awareness of the great benefits of getting outdoors.

‘We need more support and encouragement of community activities in disadvantaged areas. For example, the Nature Play programs in Queensland, Western Australia and South Australia provide heaps of ideas for helping kids enjoy the great outdoors.’

‘Our children especially benefit from spending more time outdoors. Kids who grow up experiencing natural environments may benefit developmentally and have a heightened environmental awareness as adults than those who don’t.’

The three research papers are published in *PLoS ONE*, *Landscape and Urban Planning* and *Landscape Ecology*.

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