

# THE CALL OF THE WILD: NATURE IS THE CURE

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The new trend of forest bathing uses all five senses and promises to reduce stress.  
(Photo: Karen Bleier, Getty Images)

As autumn paints the trees in glorious, vibrant colours, many Canadians are taking advantage of these final days to enjoy the great outdoors before old man winter chases us all inside.

But a little saunter through the greenery (or red and orange-ery, as the case may be) offers more than a pleasant way to pass the time. Studies show that a walk in the woods is good for our physical and mental health.

The *Washington Post* has declared “forest bathing” [the latest trend in the U.S.](#) This stress-reducing practice originated in Japan decades ago, and involves using all of your senses to soak up the experience of being in the woods. A certified forest therapy guide (who is, of course, from Los Angeles) told the *Post* that forest bathing will soon be bigger than yoga.

Engaging all of your senses to commune with nature sounds a bit hokey. But it is part of a growing movement that recognizes green space is more than just lungs for the Earth. Nature is also vital to the wellbeing of people, and hard science shows it can help address real health concerns.

The next time your doctor takes your blood pressure, she might give you a prescription

for strolls in the park, or suggest you plant a few trees.

A 90-minute walk in nature decreases rumination (which can cause depression) by [changing the neural activity](#) in the prefrontal cortex, according to a study published in the journal *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*.

Planting 10 more trees in a single city block improves residents' perception of their wellbeing in ways that are equivalent to a \$10,200 increase in annual income, or being seven years younger, according to [a recent study published in the \*Nature Research Journal\*](#).

Researchers examined the impact of trees on populations in big cities, looking at health surveys and tree density in different parts of Toronto. They discovered that people living on tree-lined urban blocks are less likely to report high blood pressure, heart disease, diabetes and obesity.

Spending time outdoors also reduces feelings of isolation, helps individuals cope with illness, and results in fewer visits to the family doctor and emergency room, according to research by the UK National Health Service. The report, backed by the UK health minister, recommends that doctors [hand out prescriptions](#) for things like

gardening and frolicking in the woods.

Ontario is now developing a program that will allow a range of health practitioners to receive professional accreditation for prescribing nature. Physicians in the U.S. are already doing this.

The ParkRx program, [created and run by U.S. health practitioners](#), public service agencies and community groups, has mapped out and ranked more than 350 parks for their accessibility to public transit, range of available activities, and safety. In the three years since the program's launch, American health practitioners have handed out more than 400 prescriptions to patients, encouraging them to spend time in one of the designated parks to alleviate health concerns.

Trees can even tackle social issues beyond health.

Green space lowers crime rates in public housing projects, [according to a study from the University of Chicago](#). Researchers found that incidents of violence and property damage were fewer in landscaped communities. The study concluded that nature reduces aggression and boosts feelings of kinship.

Canada is blessed with an abundance of wild space. But the building density in the suburbs and cities is increasing dramatically, pushing trees farther away from our doorsteps. And beyond our borders, [more than half of the world's population](#) now lives in urban regions.

Knowing that green space is part of the cure for what ails us, let's make an effort to reconnect with the great outdoors.

Before the winter blahs set in, give yourself a healthy dose of Mother Nature.