

Everyday access to nature improves quality of life in older adults

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Natural environments are known to promote physical, mental, and spiritual healing. People can attain health benefits by spending time outside, often in remote places to "get away from it all." Now research conducted by a University of Minnesota graduate student with a team in Vancouver, B.C., shows that green and "blue" spaces (environments with running or still water) are especially beneficial for healthy aging in seniors.

Published in the journal *Health and Place*, the study -Therapeutic landscapes and wellbeing in later life: Impacts of blue and green spaces for [older adults](#)—demonstrates that by incorporating smaller features,

such as a koi pond or a bench with a view of flowers, public health and urban development strategies can optimize nature as a health resource for older adults. Throughout the research, green and blue spaces promoted feelings of renewal, restoration, and spiritual connectedness. They also provided places for multi-generational social interactions and engagement, including planned activities with friends and families, and impromptu gatherings with neighbors.

"We zoomed in to everyday life for seniors between the ages of 65 and 86. We discovered how a relatively mundane experience, such as hearing the sound of water or a bee buzzing among flowers, can have a tremendous impact on overall health," says Jessica Finlay, a former research assistant on the project and lead author of the paper. Finlay is now a doctoral candidate in geography and gerontology at the University of Minnesota, where she continues to investigate influences of the built environment on health and well-being in later life. "Accessibility to everyday green and blue spaces encourages seniors to simply get out the door. This in turn motivates them to be active physically, spiritually and socially, which can offset chronic illness, disability and isolation."

Importance of everyday contact with nature

While younger generations may use green and blue spaces more to escape and rejuvenate from their busy work life, our participants used nature to be active physically, spiritually, and socially in later life. Many overcame barriers due to [chronic illness](#), disability, and progressing old age to connect regularly with green and blue spaces.

Natural environments enable older adults to uphold daily structure in retirement and provide opportunities for diverse activities outside the home. This is important to quality of later life by decreasing boredom, isolation, and loneliness; as well as boosting one's sense of purpose and accomplishment. Blue space in particular provides opportunities for non-

weight bearing physical activity and physiotherapy (e.g. wading, water walking, swimming). Waterfront areas are comforting sites for spiritual connectedness with deceased loved ones, and relaxing places to escape the strains of later life.

"While our research may seem intuitive, it creates conversations on how to build communities that serve people across their entire lifetime. We don't just need a playground for children, we also need sheltered benches for the grandparents to watch them," says Finlay. "This research is more than anecdotal; it gives credence to some small but significant elements of everyday later life. Hopefully it will help urban planners and developers build communities that span a lifetime."

Finlay offers three tips for healthier aging:

- Focus on your overall wellbeing: mental and social health are just as important as physical health when aging
- Get out the door regularly, even if it's just to the end of the block and back
- Prioritize everyday contact with nature - whether it's sitting in a park, listening to a water fountain, or looking at potted plants on a windowsill

The researchers interviewed adults aged 65 - 86 years who lived in Vancouver, B.C. All study participants were considered low-income, came from 8 different self-identified racial and ethnic groups, and experience a range of chronic conditions and experiences of [health](#).

More information: For more information, see the full online article: authors.elsevier.com/a/1R2nG4pqpjSbXW

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