

People should take part in outdoor activities for physical and mental health benefits

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Summer heat adds to the stress on the body and it's important to exercise outdoors safely. Harden has some tips for monitoring your body and when to cease activities when outside in the summer heat. Credit: Samantha Harden

With the warm summer weather here, participating in outdoor activities brings a host of psychological and physiological benefits, says Samantha Harden, an associate professor in the Department of Human Nutrition, Foods, and Exercise and a Virginia Cooperative Extension specialist.

"Outdoor activities are an opportunity to come back to nature and 'disconnect' from the technological world," Harden said. "We live in such an overstimulated world that coming back to nature can give us opportunities to find that balance that we all need."

Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans include 150 minutes of moderate-intensity [aerobic exercise](#) and two days of full body [strength training](#). Most people know about aerobic exercise but not strength training, Harden said.

Both forms of exercise are added together over a week. And the strength training doesn't have to be with added weight, Harden said. It can be with your [body weight](#) as well.

Safety during all forms of exercise is important, Harden said.

"One thing we focus on is your own perceived rate of exertion," Harden said. "Something that is considered mild for someone could be moderate or even vigorous for someone else. It's always important to do what is within your own cardiovascular and muscular safety limits."

Summer outdoor aerobic and strength activities can be wide-ranging, from taking a walk with the family or throwing a ball with a dog, Harden said. Other outdoor activities include:

- Hiking
- Biking
- Kayaking

- Outdoor yoga
- A pickup game of dodgeball, volleyball, or basketball
- Swimming in natural water or a pool, if resources allow

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- Feeling cold or clammy when outside in the heat
- Unable to catch your breath
- Turning excessively red
- Breathing too heavily

If experiencing any of these symptoms, it's important to cease the exercise and drink fluids and get somewhere cooler, if possible. It's also possible to condition the body to summer heat by taking it slow, Harden said.

To prepare for [outdoor activities](#) in the [summer heat](#) and humidity, Harden says to build up a heat tolerance. According to Julia Gohlke, an associate professor and researcher in the Virginia-Maryland College of Veterinary Medicine, start by just being outside in the heat for 15 minutes.

"Just like with [physical activity](#) where you're trying to avoid [muscle injury](#) and want to build up low and slow, you want to do the same for heat exposure," Harden said. "The first day can be overwhelming, but over time at the same temperature and duration, it doesn't feel as uncomfortable."

Provided by Virginia Tech

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