

Formalizing exposure to nature as a health recommendation

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Researchers have used a new metric to show that cardio-metabolic risk factors for men and women are linked to the built environment. Credit: Pixabay/CC0 Public Domain

Strolling through the forest, gardening, engaging in outdoor activities,

marveling at the trees and the birds—what could be better for the body and the mind?

For thousands of years, Indigenous populations have regarded their connection with nature as a mainstay of health. Now this age-old wisdom is winning converts in the world of modern medicine. Over the past 10 years, [scientific evidence](#) has been piling up showing that being surrounded by nature can help heal many [health problems](#) in both adults and children.

"Spending 20 to 30 minutes in nature significantly reduces rates of depression, lowers blood levels of the stress hormone cortisol, [blood pressure](#) and [heart rate](#), and stimulates memory and creativity," said Dr. Claudel Pétrin-Desrosiers, a clinical lecturer at the University of Montreal's Department of Family Medicine and Emergency Medicine and a family physician at the CLSC de Hochelaga-Maisonneuve. "Contact with nature is one of the only clinical approaches that has no adverse effects."

In fact, the benefits of nature for physical and [mental health](#) are so great that "[prescriptions](#) for the great outdoors" are now part of many health care professionals' arsenals, here at home and abroad. The recommended dose: a minimum of two hours per week spent surrounded by greenery, 20 minutes or more at a time.

"This is an attractive way to promote overall health as we adjust to [climate change](#)," said Pétrin-Desrosiers, one of Quebec's most prominent and credible figures in the fields of health and environment.

A Quebec first

Prescri-Nature, Quebec's first nature-prescription program, was launched with great fanfare in May with the support of organizations

representing more than 45,000 health care professionals in the province (prescriber registration is done online).

Prescri-Nature is the Quebec iteration of the BC Parks Foundation's national PaRx initiative. Its objectives are two-fold: to raise awareness of the health benefits of nature and to provide health care professionals with reliable advice and resources to boost their knowledge.

"The program aims to make nature prescriptions a formal medical act, like drug prescriptions, and to create a community of practice," said Pétrin-Desrosiers. "It's a known fact that handing a patient a slip of paper signed by a health professional will have a greater effect than verbal advice."

To each their own

When it comes to writing prescriptions, it's important to steer clear of the one-size-fits-all approach. To customize the prescription, Pétrin-Desrosiers takes the time to discuss each patient's favorite activities, how much time they spend outdoors, and their relationship to nature.

"For those who don't get out of the house much and are relatively sedentary, spending two hours a week walking in the woods may seem like a tall order," she said. "Together, we determine what they can do in a park near their home. Everyone, including those living in cities and especially in disadvantaged neighborhoods, must have access to quality natural spaces rich in biodiversity near their homes."

A subtle revolution on the horizon

From a medical standpoint, Prescri-Nature fits into the panoply of social prescriptions in medicine. After sleep, [physical activity](#) and quitting

smoking, contact with nature is the fourth pillar of good health. "The revolution is here," said Pétrin-Desrosiers. "Here's something that's within our reach, beneficial to our physical and mental health and good for the planet. It's been proven that people who spend more time in nature are more likely to protect it."

More information: [Prescri-Nature](#)

Provided by University of Montreal

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