

# Reap the Benefits of Being Outside

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## Benefits of spending time outdoors in the winter

When the warm summer days come to a close, most people say goodbye to outdoor activities for fear of the cold. While many people choose to spend the winter months inside their warm homes, you might be surprised at the multitude of both mental and physical benefits of spending time outdoors, even after the weather gets cold. It is commonly believed that being outdoors in the cold can bring on illness, which is why many parents choose to keep their children inside. However, you cannot actually get sick from spending time in the cold. You may get a runny nose, but that is just the body's way of getting rid of bacteria. As long as you bundle up and stay safe, being in the cold can actually be more beneficial than staying inside.

Taking a winter walk or building a snowman in your yard can offer a variety of physical health benefits. One of these is the Vitamin D we absorb from the sun. Humans require Vitamin D for bone health and disease prevention. Having enough Vitamin D can help protect against a plethora of diseases (National Institutes for Health). Another benefit of spending time outside during the winter is that our bodies burn more calories in the cold than in the heat. Our basal metabolic rate – which is the number of calories we burn just by living and sitting still – increases in the cold because our bodies use up more energy trying to keep warm. This increases even more when we start to shiver. So, while we cannot lose significant amounts of weight just by standing in the cold, it is healthy to spend some time moving around outside in the wintertime (New York Times).

Spending time outdoors in the winter can also help with your mental health! Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD) is a condition that many people have and is characterized by a period of depression during the winter months. Individuals with this condition may also notice themselves feeling fatigued or having increased appetite. The most effective treatment for SAD is actually light exposure (UC Davis). The best way to achieve this is to spend some time outdoors. Even people who do not suffer from SAD may notice a shift in their mood or sleep schedule in the winter, sometimes referred to as the “winter blues.” Something as simple as taking a short walk each day or watching the birds from a park bench can drastically improve your mood and make the cold winter days brighter and happier!

Spending time outdoors (no matter the season) can also help improve creativity and focus. One study found that walking outside drastically improves creativity (Oppezzo, Schwartz). Other studies have found that when children with ADHD spend time outdoors, they are more able to focus (Harvard Health Publishing), and when they spend time in a park or other natural area, they are twice as able to focus as when they spend time in cities or residential areas. So, if you are looking to boost your brain power or get some inspiration, look no further than the natural world around you!

It must be noted that going outdoors in the winter does require some preparation and precaution. Remember to always wear layers. You can always take off a layer if you get too warm, but it is dangerous to be outdoors with not enough protection from the cold. Also remember to bring plenty of water, as water fountains or other water sources may not work in freezing conditions. Another important tip is to know the weather forecast and keep an eye on the sky as you spend time outside. This will help you to avoid getting caught in a winter storm. Finally, if you choose to walk your dog outside in the winter, be sure to know that animal's limits when it comes to cold. You may want to consider taking a shorter walk than normal or putting protective garments on your pet.

It is astonishing what we can gain just from spending time outdoors in the winter. It can help us improve our bodies and our minds. So, if you are feeling restless after long days spent cooped up indoors, get outside, be safe, and have fun!

By Jessica Sobers | Jan 24, 2019

For more information on the benefits of Vitamin D:  
<https://ods.od.nih.gov/factsheets/VitaminD-HealthProfessional/>

For more information on burning calories in the cold:  
<https://www.nytimes.com/2011/01/11/science/11gna.html>

For more information on SAD:  
[https://health.ucdavis.edu/welcome/features/20090211\\_healthtip\\_winterblues/](https://health.ucdavis.edu/welcome/features/20090211_healthtip_winterblues/)

For more information on improving creativity:  
<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pubmed/24749966>



ANN ARBOR—Go outside: It helps improve your focus—even when it’s cold out.

University of Michigan psychology research in the December issue of *Psychological Science* explored the cognitive benefits of interacting with nature and found that walking in a park in any season, or even viewing pictures of nature, can help improve memory and attention.

U-M psychology researchers Marc Berman, John Jonides, and Stephen Kaplan found memory performance and attention spans improved by 20 percent after people spent an hour interacting with nature.

The researchers also found the same results when subjects looked at photos of nature. Their memory and attention scores also improved by about 20 percent.

Researchers believe the findings could have broader impact on helping people who may be suffering from mental fatigue.

*Excerpt from University of Michigan News, December 16, 2008, [Going outside-even in the cold-improves memory, attention.](#)*

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