

A clear glass vase filled with vibrant green grass, set against a blurred background of more grass. The vase is positioned centrally, and the grass blades are tall and thin, reaching towards the top of the frame.

# GOT ENOUGH NATURE?

Improving your health could be as simple as opening your front door

By **Karen Asp** for USA TODAY



## NATURE DEFICIT DISORDER

A term coined by author Richard Louv, it indicates a non-medical disorder that happens when people are too alienated from nature. It may cause depression, ADD, and obesity.

### MAYBE YOU POP A MULTIVITAMIN

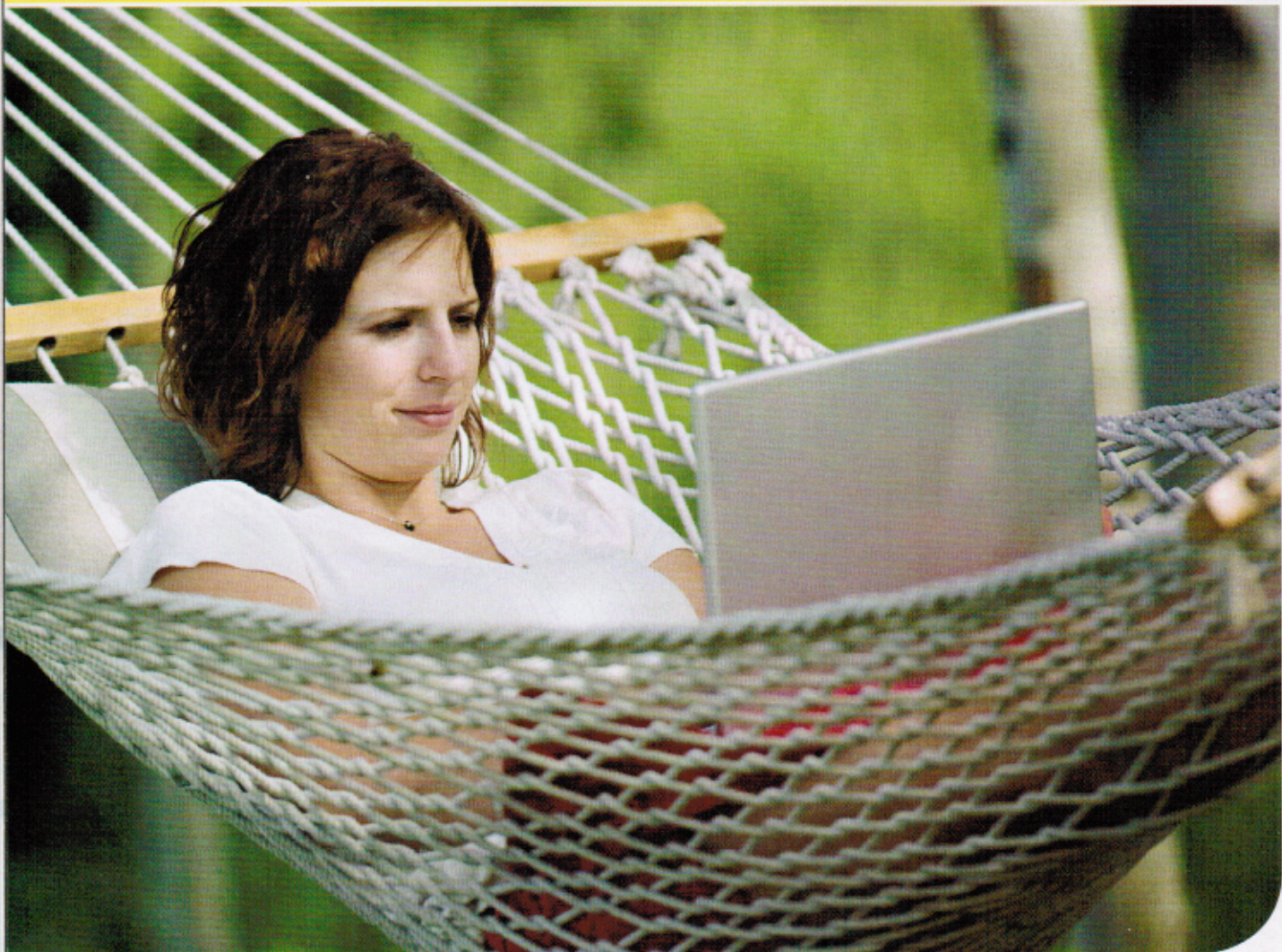
every day. Maybe you're paying more attention to your vitamin D. But chances are there's one aspect of your health that you're neglecting. Luckily, the fix is free, the effects are immediate, and the remedy is found right outside your door.

It might sound crazy to equate the outdoors to a vitamin, but just like the other nutrients in your diet, a dose of nature can improve your health. The trouble is that the conveniences of modern life have factored nature out of our existence. When was the last time you wandered through the woods or lay on the grass to watch the clouds? You might not realize how nature-deficient you are until you step outside. Reintroduce yourself to nature today and improve your overall well-being.



**THE CONVENIENCES OF MODERN LIFE HAVE FACTORED NATURE OUT OF OUR EXISTENCE.**

**WHEN WAS THE LAST TIME YOU WANDERED THROUGH THE WOODS OR LAY ON THE GRASS TO WATCH THE CLOUDS?**



### **Looking for nature in modern life**

No one's been collecting data on the shrinking amount of time people spend outdoors. But there are several red flags.

For one, the number of children walking and biking to school has taken a nosedive—from 48 percent in 1969 to just 13 percent in 2009. At the same time, screen time has skyrocketed for adults and kids alike. Kids age 8 and under spend about two hours a day in front

of a screen. And 33 percent of children under 2 have a television in their room (up from 19 percent in 2005). Adults put in plenty of screen time themselves, watching an average of almost 33 hours of television every week.

"All of these habits involve being outside less, which is why it's safe to say we're not spending as much time outdoors as we used to—or should," says Dr. Howard Frumkin, dean of the school of public health at the University of Washington, Seattle.

In fact, the lack of outdoor exposure has become such a health hazard that author Richard Louv coined a term for it: nature-deficit disorder. "This is a societal disorder, not an official medical one, that focuses on how being alienated from nature is impacting people," says Louv, author of *Last Child in the Woods*.

### **Enhancing your health**

Studies have shown clear benefits to adding more nature in your life.

For example, time in nature can lead to improvements in mental health. There's strong evidence that being in nature decreases depression. Research has also found that time spent in the outdoors improves cognitive functioning, reduces stress, and increases mental and physical energy. Spending time in nature has even been shown to improve academic performance and behavioral issues in children, Frumkin says.

There are also physical benefits: Studies have found that nature might be your ticket to a stronger immune system. Spending time outdoors may also lead to lower mortality rates for cancer and decreases in blood pressure. And hiking around while you're taking in the sights can be a great way to get in shape and maintain a healthy weight.

While scientists can pinpoint exactly why nutrients like vitamin C, magnesium, and potassium boost your well-being, the exact mechanism behind nature's influence on human health remains a mystery. However, some basic theories exist. "Because we spent our evolutionary history in nature, we may be hard-wired to need nature," says Dr. Frances E. Kuo, an associate professor and director of the Landscape and Human Health Laboratory at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign.

Other experts point to substances in nature that may be working on the body in ways that aren't visible to the naked eye. For instance, breathing in phytoncides, the essential oils found in trees, may increase the activity of white blood cells, important in maintaining the immune system, says Dr. Qing Li, a professor at Tokyo's Nippon Medical School.

Regardless of the science behind nature's perks, some reasons we benefit from interactions with

nature are simple and, well, natural. "Nature provides a venue for physical activity and social interaction, and being more active and connecting with people have tremendous benefits on health," Frumkin says.

### Filling a new prescription

All of this, though, begs an important question: How much nature do you need in your life? The truth is that nobody knows. "We do know that every little bit helps," Kuo says.

Experts are also trying to pinpoint which type of nature does us the most good. Do you need to be in a forest, for instance, or will a soccer field work? At this point, it's probably safe to assume that any time spent outside is a good thing. Studies have even found that just looking at a picture of nature can bolster your health.

The key is just getting outside, no matter where you go, says Kuo. And don't forget to take it all in. Kuo reminds herself to put her cell phone away when she's walking outside on her university's campus. "I struggle with this, as I could get so much done when I'm walking," she says. "But if I'm mentally present in the outdoors, I'll benefit more."

To determine if you're getting enough nature time, take this simple test: "If you go outside and you feel better, that's speaking to some need in you," Kuo says.

Finding ways to incorporate nature into our daily lives is more important now than ever, Louv says. He points out that as of 2008, more people in the world lived in cities than in the countryside. "Rather than factoring nature out of our lives," he says, "we have to understand that nature is fundamental to our existence and learn how to balance it with modern life before it's too late."



## GET YOUR DAILY DOSE

Reconnecting with nature may not be as hard as you think, even if you're a city-dweller. "Nature is everywhere, from the cracks in the street to our backyards," says Richard Louv, author of *Last Child in the Woods*. "You just have to open your eyes." Try one of these strategies to bring nature into your life:

- 1) Ditch the machines** at the gym and move your cardio outdoors. Do the same with your yoga practice.
- 2) Invite nature** into your backyard by planting a garden or installing a bird feeder.
- 3) Be an advocate** for more green space in your city.
- 4) Position your office desk** in front of a window so that you can see the outdoors while you work.
- 5) Leave some unlandscaped space** in your backyard, rather than filling every inch with grass or playground equipment.
- 6) Bike to work** or take your bike when running errands.
- 7) Schedule outdoor outings** with family or friends on weekends.
- 8) Take up a new outdoor hobby**, like gardening, bird watching, or fishing.
- 9) If you have kids**, encourage them to get outside whenever possible, perhaps scooting them out of the house every day for at least an hour.
- 10) Consider getting a dog**, which will need outdoor walks. Or offer to walk a neighbor's dog. Most dog owners would be delighted to oblige!
- 11) Start some nature traditions** with your family, such as catching bugs or collecting rocks.
- 12) Vacation** at a state or national park.