

How do Forests Make Us Healthier?

Have you ever walked through the woods and felt more at ease? A walk among nature can be a relaxing, fun, and stress-relieving experience for those taking a visit into their local forest. There are many reasons behind this, especially for those who have regularly connected with nature for their whole life. The nostalgia alone can bring up memories of joy, from enjoying the woods in the past. The opportunities for recreation, and the beauty of the forest both add to our enjoyment of the woods. It can even be for the benefit of your health! Studies have shown that a visit to a forest can help you fight off disease, as well as reduce your stress levels.

One study in particular is a helpful window into the health effects of a trip to the woods. A series of investigations with office workers in Japan was carried out to study the effect on human immune function. The people in the study were general working age, in normal health and had not been to the forest for at least 3 months prior. They were taken first on a 3-day trip to a forested area, and walked a mile in each forested location, allowed to rest anywhere and anytime they liked. On the final day they provided blood samples and went back to the city. Secondary studies were taken, where they took a similar 3-day trip to an urban area without trees, and another forest trip for a single day. These studies look at white blood cell count, as well as "Natural Killer" (NK) Cells, which kill tumor and virus-infected cells, to see the effect on our immune systems.

The results were remarkable, showing a significant increase in both white blood cells and NK cells. After the 3-day trip to the woods, these cell levels stayed elevated for nearly 30 days on average. During this time, the volunteers also reported lower stress levels. Even for the shorter 1-day trip, the immune response lasted for nearly a week, with similar drops in stress levels. In comparison, the 3-day trip to the city resulted in no significant change at all.

What the researchers believe caused this difference is that forests have high amounts of stress-relieving hormones in the air, released from trees as byproducts of their growth. These hormones trigger an anti-stress response in humans, which in turn results in greater immune functions.

Beyond just the physical benefits of a walk in the woods, green spaces are important to people for their mental well-being. Trees in the city, or in your yard, can be just as important as a forest full of trees. Modern life requires sustained focus for work and daily life, and the views and brief experiences of nearby nature can help restore the mind from this mental fatigue. Trees can also have a great impact on the infrastructure of a city, from reducing heat stress from absorbing light, to taking up pollutants from the ground, and improving recreational areas. When trees leave a city from development, disease, or invasive insects, it can be devastating for the community. Such examples as the Emerald Ash Borer and Dutch Elm Disease are still fresh on the mind for many Michiganders. Managing our woods for ourselves and for future generations can provide all these useful benefits for years to come. If you think a walk in the woods is just what you need, the Barry Conservation District has a forester on staff who would be glad to meet you out there! Through the Forestry Assistance Program, the district can offer free on-site assessments for your forested land, providing information on forest health and management, as well as referrals to local professionals to get any work you need done. You can call District Forester Ben Savoie at 269-908-4134, email him at ben.savoie@macd.org, or stop by the district office at 1611 South Hanover Street, Hastings, MI, Suite 105.



This month by the numbers:

8 Site visits - 485 acres
5 Private Referrals - 254
4 Public Referrals - 387
1 outreach event
2 Media Occurrences

Open referrals:

03-19-16

32 acres of forested land in Western Allegan county, landowner lives on property and has not conducted a timber harvest since ownership, aside from land clearing for home construction. Pine plantation is a large component of the woods, with minimal regeneration in the understory. An oak forest ecosystem is in place, with a transition to shade-tolerant hardwoods such as maple and beech, as well as a significant amount of hemlocks in the lower portions of the woods. Looking to thin most of the pines and sell some oak.

08-19-12

118 acre forested parcel in Branch County, seeking a management plan to enter the Qualified Forest Program, interest parties can reach Charles Tippmann at 260-414-1551.

