

Your Greenbelt, Your Health

healthy perspectives



A health information series from:



about the greenbelt

Created by provincial legislation in February 2005, the Greenbelt protects our countryside from urban development and sprawl and encourages sustainable growth within surrounding cities. The Greenbelt's locally grown food, clean water resources, climate-regulating forests, and incredible biodiversity make it vital to preserving the quality of life in southern Ontario.

about the Your Greenbelt, Your Health series:

This booklet series has been developed by Ontario Nature and the Ontario College of Family Physicians to help Ontarians understand the benefits of smart urban planning and natural-areas protection for promoting healthy lifestyles. Topics in the series include:

Environmental Quality: How the Greenbelt protects our air, water and wildlife

Getting Active in the Greenbelt: Keeping fit and healthy by exploring the Greenbelt

Good Things Grow Here: Digging into the Greenbelt's fresh food basket

Healthy Perspectives: How the Greenbelt supports mental health

Find out more at www.greenbeltforhealth.ca

Ontario Nature protects and restores nature in Ontario and connects individuals and communities to nature through research, education, public awareness and conservation actions. Ontario Nature is a charitable organization representing over 140 member organizations and 35,000 members and supporters from across Ontario.

The **Ontario College of Family Physicians** through the work of its Environmental Health Committee (EHC) has provided guidance and advice on issues relating to the environment and health since 1992. Members of the committee fulfill their mandate by researching the impacts on health of various environmental contaminants and by sharing their finding with our members. In addition, the College of Family Physicians of Canada and the World Organization of Family Doctors recognizes the academic strength of the committee members and relies on their guidance and advice on environmental health issues.



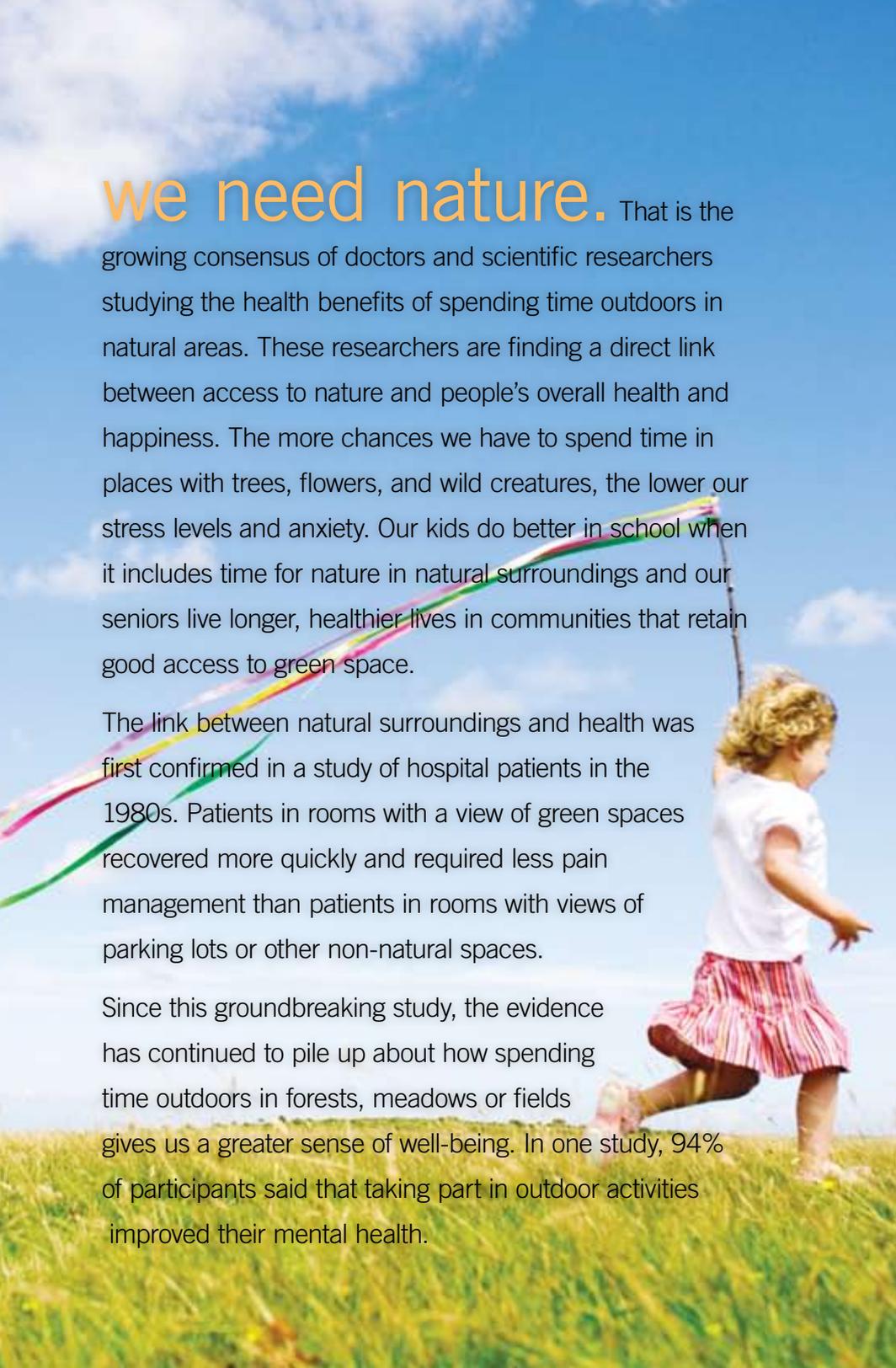
Possibility grows here.

we need nature.

That is the growing consensus of doctors and scientific researchers studying the health benefits of spending time outdoors in natural areas. These researchers are finding a direct link between access to nature and people's overall health and happiness. The more chances we have to spend time in places with trees, flowers, and wild creatures, the lower our stress levels and anxiety. Our kids do better in school when it includes time for nature in natural surroundings and our seniors live longer, healthier lives in communities that retain good access to green space.

The link between natural surroundings and health was first confirmed in a study of hospital patients in the 1980s. Patients in rooms with a view of green spaces recovered more quickly and required less pain management than patients in rooms with views of parking lots or other non-natural spaces.

Since this groundbreaking study, the evidence has continued to pile up about how spending time outdoors in forests, meadows or fields gives us a greater sense of well-being. In one study, 94% of participants said that taking part in outdoor activities improved their mental health.



there may be a couple of factors

behind these results. Nature is calming and in our hectic stress-filled lives, this stress reduction can leave us feeling refreshed and restored, while also giving us an important sense of perspective. Physically, it helps to reduce blood pressure levels and muscle tension, making those who get outside regularly less prone to cardiovascular problems or other stress-related illnesses.

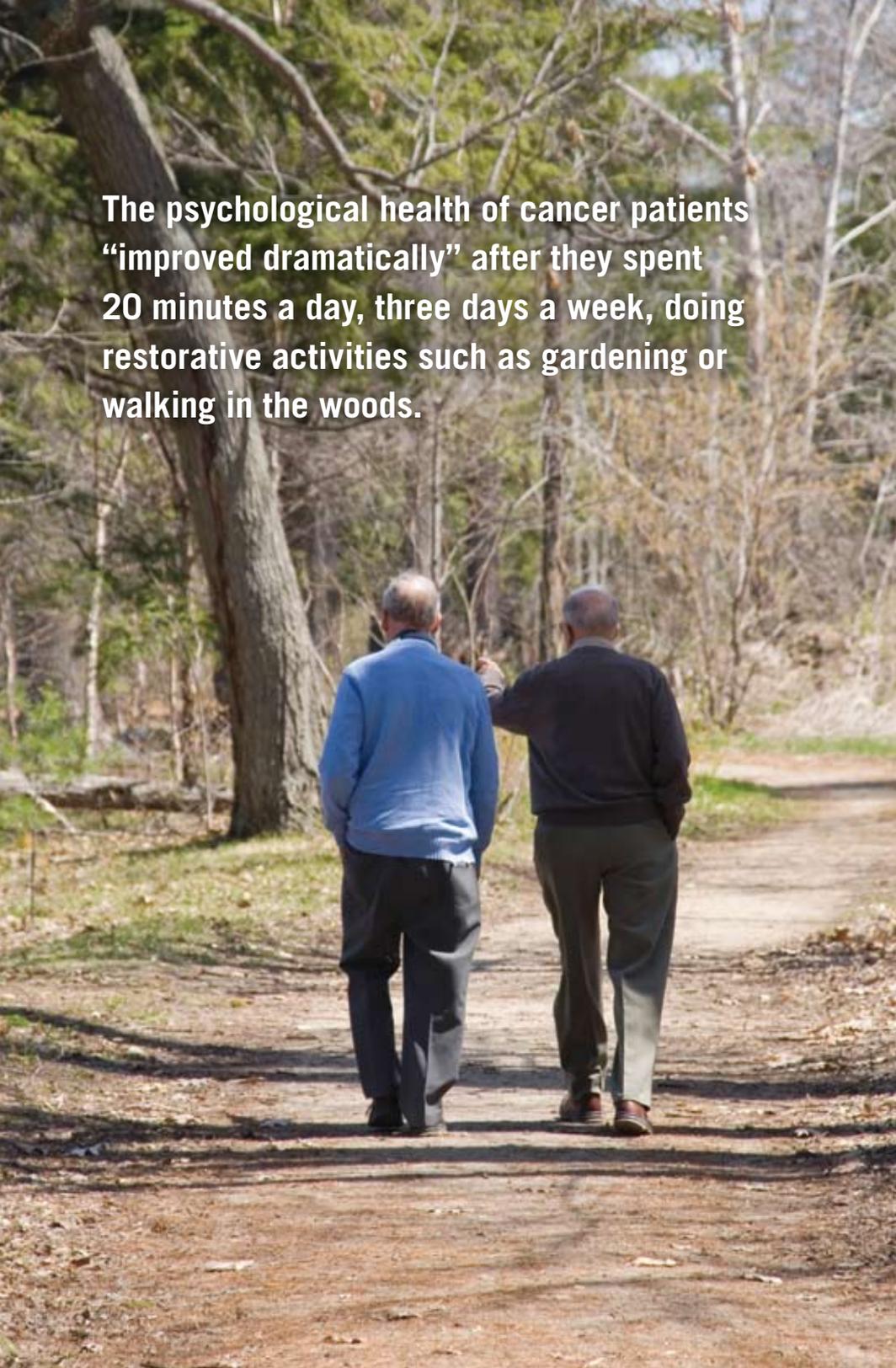
It has also been suggested that nature is simply a good fit for human beings – it stimulates our senses in a way that things like television or computers do not. Researchers say that the direct concentration required for work-related tasks is “difficult and fatiguing.” Distractions like television relieve some of the need for direct concentration but don’t really allow for mental rest due to their loud and commanding nature. A stroll through the woods, on the other hand, provides “soft” stimuli – lovely views, pleasant smells, natural sounds and no single overwhelming sensation – which means that the mind is free to wander, reflect, and recuperate. As one researcher put it, it is simply very difficult to remain depressed while taking part in a pleasant natural outing.

So having a place like the Greenbelt, with its thousands of acres of green space for relaxation and restoration gives us all a healthier perspective.



As well as being totally dependent on nature for material needs (food, water, shelter, etc.) humans also need nature for psychological, emotional and spiritual needs.

The psychological health of cancer patients “improved dramatically” after they spent 20 minutes a day, three days a week, doing restorative activities such as gardening or walking in the woods.



time in nature a big deal



It's not just hospital patients who benefit from natural vistas. Studies have found that if we can see natural areas from our workplace, we tend to be happier, more productive workers who call in sick less often than our colleagues in windowless factories or offices.

Researchers have found that workers with views of green space actually like their jobs more and deal better with a stressful environment. These workers are also more likely to stick around – the “intention to quit” was lower among workers exposed to green spaces in their work environment.

So protecting natural areas in the Greenbelt plays an important role in keeping the Southern Ontario economy humming with happy workers. And the kind of smart growth supported by the Greenbelt that creates multi-use communities surrounded by protected green spaces has some clear economic advantages.

Access to natural green space has also been linked to healthier communities. Parks and other green spaces give residents a chance to meet and socialize, thereby reducing stress and building a sense of community. If there are good opportunities to get outside in natural surroundings, crime levels tend to be lower and community ties stronger.

This is good news for communities in and near the Greenbelt that can grow stronger and safer thanks to their natural surroundings.



Access to nature in the workplace is related to lower levels of perceived job stress and higher levels of job satisfaction.

After completing a 40-minute task designed to exhaust attention capacity, some participants were randomly chosen to spend 40 minutes walking in a local nature preserve, with others walked in an urban area or sat quietly reading. Those that walked in the nature preserve performed better than the others on a standardized proofreading task in addition to reporting more positive feelings and less anger.

for the kids

The group that may benefit the most from regular time in natural areas is our kids. Researchers studying the differences between kids who spend all their time in front of video games and TV and those who regularly get outside have found a long list of differences.

Kids who get outdoors regularly have longer attention spans, play more creatively and cooperatively together, are less prone to obesity, and have a better ability to focus. Unfortunately, a recent U.S. study found that only 6% of six to nine-year-old children play outside regularly. Many researchers are now linking this lack of outdoor time with surging rates of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) and the prescribing of anti-depressants for children.

Richard Louv, author of “Last Child in the Woods”, asks “Could it be that the huge increase in kids on anti-depressants is because we took away the calming effect of natural experience?”

In fact, researchers are finding that the calming effect of nature can be a valuable therapy for kids with ADHD. A 2004 study found that “Green outdoor activities reduced symptoms significantly more than activities conducted in other settings did,



We can now assume that just as children need good nutrition and adequate sleep, they may very well need contact with nature



even when activities were matched across settings. Findings were consistent across age, gender, and income groups; community types; geographic regions; and diagnoses.”

Putting natural experiences back into children’s lives is important for all kids. For example, students attending schools that incorporate hands-on experience with nature produce significantly better results in social studies, science, language arts and math. In one California study, students at a school that incorporated outdoor learning scored 27% higher on science exams than those in schools that did not. And getting outside keeps kids active, which is a great antidote to the health problems caused by obesity in our increasingly couch-potato society.

Keeping kids inside, Richard Louv believes, threatens “their independent judgment and value of place” and does real damage to “their ability to feel awe and wonder, [and] to their sense of stewardship for the Earth.” In other words, kids who rarely venture past the front door except to go to the mall are

For a good list of outdoor education resources, visit the Council of Outdoor Educators of Ontario website at www.coeo.org/links.htm



simply missing out on a big part of life. Organized sports are great, but no substitute for simply messing around in a local woodlot or field or going for a walk in the woods – what researchers call “unstructured play.”

An Australian study confirms this. It found that kids who played in a more natural playground setting performed better at concentration tasks than kids who played in an asphalt jungle. The reason? According to the study’s authors, “Greener playgrounds elicit fascination, which is an effortless type of interest, rather than concentration, which can be hard work.”

The Greenbelt, of course, is all about protecting opportunities for future generations. The fields, woods and parks that made many childhoods special will still be there for generations to come thanks to its protected natural areas and rural landscape, which is a real gift to our kids.

finding our place

One of the biggest reasons we are becoming more and more cut off from the natural world is that our ability to step out the door and see and explore natural areas is not what it once was. Urban sprawl has severed many of our natural connections. No longer is there a woodlot or old field just down the street or a clear creek running through a local park in just about every neighbourhood.

Research on the links between nature and mental health makes it clear, however, that you don't need to venture deep into the wilderness to experience a lift from nature. Any natural setting, whether it is a local woodlot, park or tree-lined pathway will do. Easy access to nature is important, especially as urban areas become more densely developed. Even small natural spaces – a clump of trees or an old field – can be important in opening up a world of exploration and imagination for children.

This is why we need to restore natural connections by making sure that green space remains a big part of our communities. Fortunately, the “smart planning” approach to urban areas that helped to drive the creation of the Greenbelt is also helping us turn back the clock to a time when green space was a part of every community. And the Greenbelt itself gives residents in Southern Ontario a big leg up in getting outside and experiencing nature. Its 1.8 million acres of protected green space can, quite simply, keep us smiling.



For more information on where to get outside in the Greenbelt, visit www.greenbeltforhealth.ca/getting_active.php



www.greenbeltforhealth.ca 1.800.440.2366



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