

The Japanese healing art of *Shinrin-yoku* has been a part of preventive health care since its development during the 1980s. Can some time with the trees fix what ails you?

For a while now, doctors have been noting that spending time in the outdoors is good for our health, and that incorporating outdoor time into a fitness routine can up the ante on the benefits of exercise.

Taking your fitness goals *out there* can lift your mood, improve your focus, provide faster healing and less pain, and even makes the very act of exercising easier.



moving slowly, and take a break from the stress of their daily lives.”

Invoking many of the ideas featured in *Last Child in the Woods*, Richard Louv’s groundbreaking work on nature deficit disorder in children, new research on forest bathing confirms that the simple engagement of the five senses in contemplation in a forest provides:

Shinrin-yoku, translated as “forest bathing,” puts a different spin on the idea of exercising outdoors and suggests that there are significant health benefits to be derived from engaging all five senses in a gentle, contemplative walk through a forest ecosystem.

Says Ben Page, a certified forest therapy guide from Los Angeles, “Whereas a ... hike’s [objective] is to reach a destination, a *Shinrin-yoku* walk’s objective is to give participants an opportunity to slow down, appreciate things that can only be seen or heard when one is

- ◆ A boosted immune system functioning, with an increase in the count of the body’s Natural Killer (NK) cells.
- ◆ Reduced blood pressure
- ◆ Reduced stress
- ◆ Improved mood
- ◆ Increased ability to focus, even in children with ADHD
- ◆ Accelerated recovery from surgery or illness
- ◆ Increased energy level

- ◆ Improved sleep

A regular practice ultimately brings practitioners:

- ◆ Deeper and clearer intuition
- ◆ Increased flow of energy
- ◆ Deepening of friendships
- ◆ Overall increase in sense of happiness

There's Something in the Air

The philosophy and research are fascinating. For example, while improved immune system function could be demonstrated on research subjects who spent time in nature, no similar improvement was noted in comparison city excursions. Reduction in stress is one factor at play here. However, a measurement in the air of the natural chemicals secreted by evergreen trees, collectively known as *phytoncides*, corresponded to the improvements in immune function—interesting when you recall that



Raven's Horn Overlook in the Tiadaghton State Forest
Photo: Curt Weinhold (pbase.com/cwphoto)

treatment for tuberculosis once involved the so-called “forest cure,” with the establishment sanatoriums in Germany’s pine forests and in the Adirondack forests of New York, for example. There was speculation among the physicians of the time that pine trees secreted a healing balm into the air. And like many a long-forgotten theory, it seems they may have been right!

Five Steps to Forest Bathing (from Mind Body Green):

See the trees, the plants growing under foot, the fungi, moss and lichen. Look up, down and all around for animals hiding under rocks, in burrows, and on tree branches. Notice the colors, shapes and textures.

Hear the rustling of leaves, the bird songs, or running water. Listen for the subtle sounds.

Feel the ground beneath your feet, the strength of tree trunks, the softness of leaves, or the prickliness of pine cones.

Smell the fresh air and the evergreens. Get close and smell the flowers.

Taste pine needle or ginkgo leaf tea. (Be sure to accurately identify any plant you are going to taste.)

Like many Eastern healing methods, the idea of *Shinrin-yoku* is quite simple—and hardly “new” or trendy. Go outside, breathe, stroll.

Resources for Additional Reading and Viewing

- ◆ Shinrin-yoku—<http://www.shinrin-yoku.org>
- ◆ Association of Nature & Forest Therapy Guides & Program—<http://www.natureandforesttherapy.org>
- ◆ Mind Body Green: Why You Need to Try Forest Bathing—<http://www.mindbodygreen.com/0-21066/why-you-need-to-try-japanese-forest-bathing.html>)
- ◆ The Washington Post: To Your Health—<https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/to-your-health/wp/2016/05/17/forest-bathing-is-latest-fitness-trend-to-hit-u-s-where-yoga-was-30-years-ago/>
- ◆ National Geographic Channel—<http://channel.nationalgeographic.com/explorer/videos/forest-bathing/>