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5 unexpected benefits of exercising outdoors

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NerdWallet

Winter is on its way out, and as you pack up your coats and gloves, you might also want to put away your gym membership. The benefits of getting regular exercise are well known, but fewer people realize that working out outdoors could be even better for your health—and your bottom line.

Less than one-quarter of American adults get the recommended amount of aerobic and strength training exercise each week, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), so if you're working out on a regular basis, you deserve a pat on the back. But getting regular exercise doesn't necessarily mean you're getting the most out of your workout. As the weather warms, getting outdoors could deliver perks that you just can't get from pounding a treadmill.

1. It's good for your mind and your body.

We work out mostly for the physical benefits, but what about the mental boost? A research team from the Peninsula College of Medicine and Dentistry analyzed 11 trials including more than 800 adults and found that outdoor exercise was associated with increased energy and revitalization, as well as decreased confusion, anger, depression and tension, when compared with exercising indoors. Outdoor participants also reported enjoying their workouts more and said they were more likely to repeat them than participants who were closed up behind a door.

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2. It may make you feel better about yourself.

When you're at the gym, it can sometimes feel like all eyes are on you. When you're exercising in nature, the local wildlife doesn't care about your struggle. Exercise in general is good for your confidence, but outdoor exercise may be even better: There is evidence from the University of Essex that working out in nature can improve your self-esteem. Further, you don't have to go all out; the researchers found low-intensity exercise had the biggest positive effects.

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3. Outdoor fitness may be easier to stick with.

Creating an exercise habit is difficult, but finding one you enjoy can make it easier to come back to. So that shot of pleasure you get from being outdoors may mean it's more likely you'll stick to your program. Canadian researchers found postmenopausal women reaped more benefits from outdoor workouts and were significantly more likely to adhere to their training program than those who did their exercising indoors.

4. Soak up the sunshine benefits.

While unprotected overexposure to the sun's ultraviolet rays can increase your risk of skin cancer, we shouldn't overlook the many benefits of sunlight. When the sun hits our skin, it creates vitamin D3, important to bone health and metabolic function. In addition, exposure to sunlight during the day can help you sleep better at night, improve immune function and increase endorphin production—those feel-good hormones circulating throughout your body.

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5. It's cheaper than the gym.

Even going without your gym membership for just six months of the year can save you hundreds of dollars. You may want to invest in sunscreen, good shoes and some weather-friendly workout clothes, but you're still likely to spend less than the average gym pass.

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Making the most of an outdoor workout

You may be convinced of the value of outdoor workouts but wondering what those workouts should entail.

True, the local park probably doesn't have the free weights your gym does or offer the comforts of working out in your living room. But if you can find a trail for some cardio and a clearing for some body weight exercises, you can get a worthwhile full-body workout.

Walking lunges, jump squats and step-ups onto a park bench will work your lower body, while push-ups, pull-ups on the monkey bars, and tricep dips can work your upper half. Spend a half-hour on a brisk walk or jog, and you're on your way to getting all of your recommended exercise for the day.

Daily exercise can be a challenge. But when your workout has the opportunity to boost your mood and your health, and save you some money, the choice to get off the couch becomes just a little easier.

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