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Spending time in nature isn't a cure for everything that ails us, but it sure does offer some preventative and therapeutic benefits and it is a medical fact that spending time outdoors, especially in green spaces, is good for you.

All you need is 120 minutes per week! According to a paper in the journal Scientific Reports and as covered in the New York Times, the data shows that about 120 minutes a week is all you need to spend outdoors to reap its natural benefits. The study further shows that only spending 60-90 minutes outdoors per week did not have as significant effect and spending more time outside does not render additional benefits.

Berks Nature Rx is an easy way to introduce (or reintroduce) nature into your routine weekly life. The Berks County Medical Society and Berks Nature encourage doctors, patients, and the community in general to commit to spending 120 minutes (2 hours) in the great outdoors to help prevent disease, and as a therapy for physical and mental challenges.

What is Berks Nature Rx?

Use our website, www.berksnaturerx.com, to gather the resources you need to spend at least 120 minutes outdoors every week. If you are a parent, you can use these tools to help your children spend at least 120 minutes outdoors every week. Let's face it 120 minutes, or two hours each week, is an achievable goal even during our busiest times. Your 120 minutes could consist of visiting a park, walking your dog, hiking a trail, riding a bike, or simply taking a break in nature.

New to spending time outside?

Don't want to take an adventure alone? That is OK! Go to www.berksnaturerx.com to find local groups that gather outdoors. And, look for local Nature Rx events such as guided hikes, a walk with a doctor, and mental health meet-ups outdoors.

Every local trail (that we are aware of!) is linked to berksnaturerx.com as well. Now that you have the resources you need you can begin logging your minutes! Once you reach 500 minutes you can visit The Nature Place for your FREE gift, and learn about incentives to continue participating in the Nature Rx program.

Learn more at www.berksnaturerx.com

DID YOU GET OUTSIDE TODAY?



The State of the Environment in Berks program evaluates specific indicators and trends in five environmental categories: Air, Energy, Land, Waste and Water. The data has been evaluated for more than ten years in Berks County through this program. A common theme of measuring and promoting "time spent outside" has emerged as an important State of the Environment indicator. Berks Nature, in partnership with the Berks County Medical Society, is proud to bring you Berks Nature Rx to begin measurement and discussion of this community health indicator.



Become a Berks Nature member today!
BerksNature.org
610-372-4992
575 St. Bernardine Street
Reading, PA 19607



STATE OF THE ENVIRONMENT

• BERKS COUNTY, PA •

Take more pictures.
Whether you use your smartphone or a polaroid camera, get outside and take some photos! You can even show them off in local photo contests like the Reading Fair in the summer.

MOVE THE DINNER TABLE OUTSIDE.
If you don't have an outside patio, pack up dinner and go to Gring's Mill or your neighborhood park. Don't feel like cooking, visit one of the many restaurants in Berks that have outside dining.

KEEP A JOURNAL.
sketch outside, or do something to remember how much fun you're having.

WATCH A SUNRISE AND A SUNSET.
Great location for either could be the Pagoda in Reading, Hawk Mountain Sanctuary, or even your own backyard.

Walk. Run. Bike. Get on the Trail.
Learn more about great trails and opportunities in Berks, visit www.greaterreadingtrails.com! Get involved and run a 5K. There is one almost every weekend in Berks County!

Stargaze.
For public viewings, visit www.berksastronomy.org.

GO CAMPING
Even if it's outside in your own backyard. Camping is a great way to connect with nature and there are many places to camp in Berks County such as French Creek State Park!

GROW SOMETHING GREEN!

LEARN SOMETHING NEW!
Take a class in something that involves the outdoors such as fly fishing, photography, or gardening. Berks Nature offers programs during the year for those that want to learn something and be outdoors at the same time.

GET CAUGHT IN THE RAIN AND LIKE IT, MAYBE EVEN DANCE IN IT.

We have become so busy in our daily lives keeping up with work, school, sports and extracurricular activities that we sometimes forget to *stop and smell the roses*, literally. Stop to take a break in our own backyard, a forest, or local park. Or, focus time on our bodies and being active in the outdoors. Children are especially vulnerable to this and are not spending enough time outdoors. This new normal is taking a toll on the health of our community.

Berks County is fortunate to be home to an abundance of trails, parks, and open spaces that are FREE and accessible to the public. Nature is right here in front of us – and can serve as medicine. Nature is both preventative and therapeutic. We challenge Berks County to spend more time in nature – for physical and mental benefit – by participating in the Berks Nature Rx program.

Berks Nature Rx is an easy way to introduce (or re-introduce) nature into your routine weekly life. The Berks County Medical Society and Berks Nature believe that doctors, patients, and the community in general need to utilize the great outdoors to help prevent disease, and as a therapy for physical and mental challenges.



Nature Can Improve Health and Wellbeing

Spending time in nature provides children with a wide range of health benefits.

Healthy Babies

Nature exposure for mothers can promote:

- Better Fetal Growth
- Healthier Birth Weights

Healthy Eyes and Vitamin D Levels

Time spend in bright sunlight can:

- Reduce Nearsightedness
- Increase Vitamin D Levels

“...the growing disconnection with our natural environment is exacerbating the escalating rates of mental illness and that mental health professionals should be prescribing time in nature as often as possible, as well as advocating on the policy level to help ensure access to green spaces for everyone.”

“For this to happen, high quality parks, gardens and nature reserves need to be nearby, served by good public transport, affordable, safe, attractive, with good signage and interpretive information, well managed and maintained, and accessible to people with different physical needs,” she says. “If we are to prevent an upsurge in mental health issues, especially among children, we need to re-engage humans with nature as a matter of urgency.”

Mardie Townsend, PhD, Deakin University

Current Health of our Community

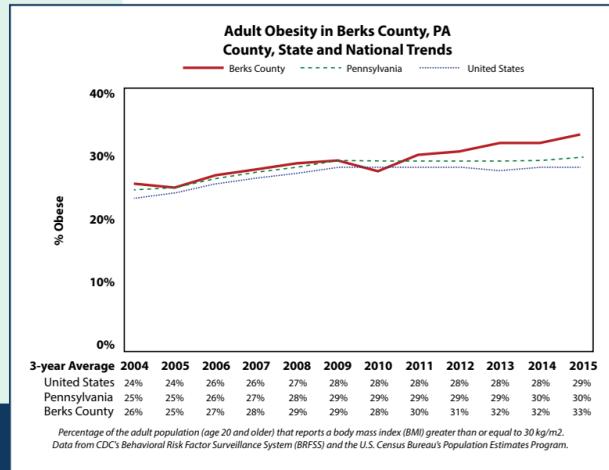
According to the Berks County Community Needs Health Assessment of 2013, our local community is trending higher in obesity rates than the average for Pennsylvania and higher than the United States average. Obesity is one of the biggest drivers of preventable chronic diseases in the US. Being overweight or obese increases the risk for many health conditions, including type 2 diabetes, heart disease, stroke, hypertension, cancer, Alzheimer’s disease, dementia, liver disease, kidney disease, osteoarthritis, and respiratory problems. Clearly, the health of our community needs to improve, and many of the symptoms and diseases described here are preventable.

In Berks County:

- Nearly one-third of adults (30.2%) are obese and more than one-third (35.9%) are overweight.
- One-third of Berks County adults (33.4%) have been diagnosed with high blood pressure; this percentage represents 105,400 adults.
- One in seven adults (13.9%) has been diagnosed with diabetes.
- Although 14.6% of Berks Countians have been diagnosed with a mental health condition, only 38.5% of those are receiving treatment for their condition.
- Berks County has a higher percentage (24.9%) than the state (24%) of physical inactivity, even though the access to exercise is comparable to the state.
- Percentage of the adult population (age 20 and older) that reports a body mass index (BMI) greater than or equal to 30 kg/m². 33% in Berks County vs. 30% in PA
- In Berks County in 2014 diseases of the heart and Chronic lower respiratory disease were on the top three list of causes of death.

Fun Ways to Get Outside

- Go for a morning or evening walk every day.
- Try gardening. From planting a vegetable and fruit garden to planting a few flowers, both activities get you outside regularly and communing with nature.
- Have a staycation. Visit French Creek State Park and Nolde Forest State Park and explore the trails and activities that are available. It saves you fuel and invests in local resources.
- Find a trail. Whether hiking or biking is your speed, there are trails around the county for you to explore. Find one near you at www.greaterreadingtrails.com.
- Slow down and connect with nature. Sit outside quietly and just appreciate the natural beauty around you! Notice the scents, sights and sounds as you sit quietly and focus on the moment.
- Go to your neighborhood park or playground. The next time the weather is good, trade your usual gym workout for an outdoor one! Commit to the outdoors, rain or shine.
- When you’re layered properly, you can enjoy the outdoors in any season, cold, wet or hot.
- Fish your local streams and lakes.



Increased Physical Activity

Access to parks and greenspace can foster:

- Increased Physical Activity
- Reduced Risk of Obesity

Outdoor Play

- Children who have frequent access to the outdoors “gain competence in moving through the larger world;” it also helps them to develop courage.
- Free and unstructured play is essential for helping children reach important social, emotional, and cognitive developmental milestones.

Coping Skills

- Children are better able to cope with stress when they live near trees and other greenery.



Time currently spent outside

Spending time outside can function as a natural medicine for both children and adults. It can help improve your physical, mental, and emotional wellbeing. Spending more time outdoors is also linked to living longer. As humans become less connected with nature, we lose an essential health buffer.

Unfortunately, in the United States people are spending less and less time outdoors. At Berks Nature, we are concerned about this trend as we think about our future leaders in our community. Will they have the same love and respect for nature that we all share? Will the protection of the environment be a priority?

Let’s take a look at some current numbers that are concerning for the health and wellbeing of our children:

- Less than one-quarter (24%) of children 6 to 17 years of age participate in 60 minutes of physical activity every day.
- In the United States, the average child spends 1% of their time participating in unstructured outdoor play. 1%
- In August 2019, Berks Nature surveyed 453 youth from the City of Reading between the ages of 5 – 17 to gain an understanding of the amount of time they are spending outside on a daily basis. 25% of them spend less than one hour outside daily, and 13% reported that they spend ZERO time outside.

The average American child spends 1% of their time participating in unstructured outdoor play.



Sources:

Physical Activity Behaviors of Young People <https://www.cdc.gov/healthyschools/physicalactivity/facts.htm>
https://www.cdc.gov/healthyschools/physicalactivity/pdf/2019_04_25_Recess-Brief_508tagged.pdf
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Social-Emotional Wellbeing

Learning in nature can support:

- Improved Relationship Skills
- Reduced Stress, Anger and Aggression

Recess

Recess is a regularly scheduled period in the school day for physical activity and play. During recess, students are encouraged to be physically active and engaged with their peers in activities of their choice, at all grade levels, kindergarten through 12th grade.

Recess benefits students by:

- Increasing their level of physical activity.
- Improving their memory, attention, and concentration.
- Helping them stay on-task in the classroom.
- Reducing disruptive behavior in the classroom.
- Improving their social and emotional development (e.g., learning how to share and negotiate).

While elementary schools are meeting the national guidance to provide at least 20 minutes of daily recess, there are still many that do not offer recess. Even for those that do, school recess practices can be stronger and more comprehensive. And for many who do, students do not spend their recess outdoors. School recess practices can be stronger and more comprehensive. Berks Nature is currently working with the Berks County Intermediate Unit to gain a better understanding of recess statistics for our local public school systems.

Spending time outside leads to more activity, and improved physical and mental health.

