



Get Outdoors to Get Active

USE THIS FIELD GUIDE TO
HELP YOU RECONNECT TO
THE NATURAL WORLD.

For many people, an exercise routine means getting in a car, driving to the gym, slogging away on an elliptical machine and then retreating back to their homes or offices, where they sit down in front of the blue glow of a laptop, TV, tablet or phone. But there's something missed when exercise takes place only in indoor gyms and fitness studios. Trading up some of your gym time for time on the trails, the river or the bike path can bring benefits beyond improved fitness.

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Discover the perks of going green.

“Green space is not just a luxury,” says Jolanda Maas, a Dutch sociologist who has studied people’s living environments. “It’s essential for good health.”

One theory has to do with our ancestors. Not so many thousands of years ago, we survived by hunting and gathering. “Greenness, water and plants relax us, possibly because they signal access to food and shelter,” says Seattle-based environmental psychologist Judith Heerwagen, Ph.D.

“Science shows that when you take a walk outdoors, you lower stress-hormone levels and are in a better position to adapt and adjust to life’s constant changes,” says Pamela Peeke, M.D., a clinical assistant professor at the University of Maryland School of Medicine.

Natural surroundings can also motivate us to move more. Few people know this better than Tina Vindum, a former professional skier who is now a self-described “outdoor trainer” in San Francisco. Her clients do predictable things like pull-ups and lunges—but from tree limbs and on hillsides. “Every movement in the gym is exactly the same,” said Vindum. “Our bodies are smart; they go on autopilot quickly.” Finding your footing on grass, rocks and roots, on the other hand, activates more muscle fiber for stability—something you’ll rarely get on an indoor surface.

Vindum says her clients are also just plain happier outdoors. “And no wonder—the gym is an artificial place where you run on a machine that goes nowhere,” says Peeke. “Outside, you’re connecting with something much bigger, and there’s a sense of joy.”

FOUR OUTDOOR STRENGTH-TRAINING EXERCISES TO TRY.

HILL LUNGE:

Strengthens hips and legs.

Facing a hill or steep street, take a giant step forward with your right foot. As you lean into the hill, keep your left leg long, with your weight propped on your toes and your left knee pointing down; sink your right hip toward your right heel, bending your right knee 90 degrees. Inhale as you lower your hip; exhale as you push through your back toes to the starting position.

Repeat, alternating legs, 10 to 20 times.

TREE SIT:

Strengthens shoulders, abs and quadriceps.

Sit with your back against a tree, knees bent 45 to 90 degrees, pressing your heels firmly into the ground. Pull your lower abs in and up, toward your lower back and spine. Raise your arms out to your sides and hold them parallel to the ground at shoulder height.

Hold for 30 to 60 seconds.

HANGING CRUNCH:

Strengthens abs and hips.

Hang from a sturdy tree limb or monkey bar, using an overhand grip. Slowly lift your knees toward your chest and lower your legs back down.

Repeat 5 times. Work up to 20 reps.

BALANCED LEG RAISE:

Strengthens calves and improves balance.

Stand on a root, step or curb, hanging your heels over the edge. Engage your calf muscles by spreading your toes, lifting your heels and balancing on the balls of your feet. Slowly lower your heels back down and below the edge of the step. *Repeat 10 to 20 times.*