

HEALTH

# Make forest bathing your next healthful practice

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*The art of a mindful walk in nature is a key component of de-stressing.*



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The Japanese were onto something in the 1980s when they started to prescribe walks in nature as part of their national health regime. Since this practice started and other peoples across the world have begun to partake in forest bathing, the science is only growing to show the benefits of what a walk in the forest, or any part of nature, can do for humans' mental and physical health.

"The practice is slowing down, breathing deeply," says [Melanie Choukas-Bradley](#), a naturalist and certified forest therapy guide. "The trees and other plants [around you] give off a lot of volatile chemicals that are very good for our own health."

And what do those volatile chemicals, or aerosols, do? Studies show that the natural chemicals secreted from evergreen trees, called phytoncides, are associated with boosting immune defenders. There are studies that show lower levels of cortisol, the body's stress hormone, after just a 40-minute walk in the forest. And other studies draw direct comparisons between time spent in nature and a boost in creativity and problem-solving.

"Right now we have so much stimuli that comes at us any given point of the day," says Denise Burdette, an Arlington forest bathing guide and owner of [Fertile Return](#). "When you remove that all away and you leave it behind and then submerge yourself in a totally natural environment, it can be very impactful and therapeutic." She adds that the practice can be done in any natural environment as long as the participant focuses on "decoupl[ing] your intellectual mind from your intuitive mind."

With yoga, meditation and mindfulness practices becoming mainstream, Choukas-Bradley sees the interest in forest bathing as a natural step for many. But unlike hiking or a walk on a trail, there is something deeper about the practice. Not only is forest bathing about tuning out the daily stresses, but it is also about tuning into the forest. Choukas-Bradley starts her tours by inviting people to notice what is in motion—"the breeze just barely blowing through trees or waving through the grass ... a butterfly flying past"—and then moving on to other senses such as smell and touch.

Burdette shares the reason behind experiencing forest bathing with a guide: "You want to understand the methodology behind it, and that is what a guide brings to the equation," she says. "It is the simplicity that draws you to it, but it is the richer, deeper experience that keeps you coming back."

## Local Guides' Favorite Places to Forest Bathe:

Theodore Roosevelt Island  
 Huntley Meadows  
 River Farm  
 Mount Vernon  
 Lake Fairfax  
 Sky Meadows Park

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