**Health benefits of outdoors not accessible for many Albertans**

Access to parks and wild spaces is a public health issue because spending time in natural places can impart numerous health benefits.

Parks and other wild spaces provide a place to recreate and participate in physical activity. Alberta’s parks provide the setting for numerous physical activities, from walking, running and cycling to climbing and kayaking. Participation in physical activity has varied health benefits, such as strengthening of bones and muscles, and risk reduction for cardiovascular disease and type 2 diabetes.

Studies have found that simply spending time outdoors is beneficial for health. For example, research suggests that time outdoors may reduce inflammation, myopia and risk of an early death while boosting the immune system, and can increase self-efficacy, mindfulness and well-being. Studies have also found that the duration of outdoor living may lead to improved short-term memory, restored mental energy, stress relief, improved concentration, and sharper thinking and creativity.

Since Alberta’s parks and wild places offer enormous health benefits, access to these places is a public health issue. The Alberta Recreation and Parks Association, an Alberta Public Health Association partner, helps addresses this public access issue by promoting the importance of outdoor recreation.

Parks and wild spaces have further importance from an ecological determinants of health perspective. The environment has a great effect on human health and the health of other species. As parks and wild spaces can offer such enormous health benefits, the preservation of wild spaces is integral to ensuring the health of individuals and communities in the future.

There couldn’t be a better time to get outside as admission to all national parks, national historic sites and national marine conservation areas is free through the end of 2017 as part of Canada 150 celebrations.

As we come to understand the health benefits of time spent outdoors, it is important to consider whether access to such places is equitable across the population. Numerous barriers to spending time recreating outdoors exist. For example, the ability to spend time outdoors may require time off from work, transportation, specialized gear, and disposable income for admission fees, etc. Certain outdoor activities require technical skills and knowledge of outdoor safety. Health-related factors relating to accessing wild spaces may pose barriers to people with disabilities or health conditions. As well, wild spaces often become farther away as Alberta increasingly becomes overwhelmingly urban.

Visiting and recreating in wild spaces require resources, knowledge, and abilities that are not equally distributed across all segments of Alberta society. Thus, we must do more to address socioeconomic, knowledge and health factors so more Albertans can reap the health benefits of getting outdoors.

Sources

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