



THE FOREST AND ITS POTENTIAL FOR HEALTH

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Abstract

Introduction. People have always enjoyed the forest, regardless of their age, due to the peaceful atmosphere, mild climate, very beautiful landscapes, fresh air, pleasant flower and plant scents. Over the past years, a new medical science termed forest medicine has developed, as an interdisciplinary science which encompasses the effects of forest environments on human health.

Material and methods. We reviewed the observational clinical studies, the randomized controlled trials in PubMed, Embase, Scopus, Web of Science, Cochrane Library, Google Scholar, over the past 20 years, until June 2020. The search terms included forest, forest bathing, cardiovascular effects, respiratory, blood pressure, diabetes mellitus, coronary artery disease, stress, psychological effects.

Results and discussions. The results of the studies show that the benefits of the forest on the cardiovascular system are obvious regardless of age, sex, socioeconomic environment or previous exposure to a natural environment. Also, walking in the forest environment can promote cardiovascular relaxation through facilitation of the parasympathetic nervous system and suppression of the sympathetic nervous system. Furthermore, forest therapy can be efficient in reducing negative psychological symptoms. The current literature supports the benefits of exposure to nature and green environments for human health, through the effects on: the immune system (increase of natural killer cells/ prevention of cancer), the cardiovascular system (hypertension/coronary artery disease), the respiratory system (allergies and respiratory diseases), depression and anxiety (mood disorders and stress), mental relaxation. The studies performed showed the benefits associated with continuous immersion in nature for cardiovascular diseases, but further studies are definitely required.

Conclusion. There is increasing evidence suggesting that the forest can provide very many benefits for health. Global studies regarding future research directions, global urban planning and architecture, as well as the elaboration of policies in order to obtain new evidence of the relationships between the forest - forest bathing and clinical therapeutic effects are needed.