

Get Outside – and take your workouts from so-so to supercharged!

By Diane Raymond

In a funk because your daily trek on the treadmill has turned into an event only slightly more exciting than watching a pot of water boil? If so, maybe it's time to tuck your gym pass away in a safe place and step outside.

Research conducted at the University of Essex showed that outside exercise has benefits that extend beyond the expected calorie-burning effect. It turns out that surrounding yourself with nature stimulates spiritual feelings and your senses, and gives you an escape from modern life. This shouldn't be a surprise, but exercising outdoors also lowers stress levels, improves concentration and positively impacts health and well-being.

Getting Started: Assess The Scenery

How well do you know your surroundings? At first glance, your neighborhood or community may not appear to have the same tools and equipment you're accustomed to using inside. Look a little closer, however, and you will notice hills and trees, curbs, stairs, playgrounds, pathways, picnic tables, benches, rocks and large tree limbs. The landscape has plenty of "equipment" and once you know how to utilize it all, the world becomes your gym.

Before you get started, spend some time driving or biking around your community to scope out potential workout sites. In addition to parks and playgrounds, note where the schools, community green spaces and cityscapes are – these are all viable options for working out. Taking full advantage of the scenery and landscape will not only rev up your cardio routine, it will give you a mind-body experience that engages your senses, as well as your glutes!

Get More from Your Outdoor Workout

1. Start close to home. Your most convenient option may be your own neighborhood. My own neighborhood, for example, has a surrounding pathway that is downhill on one side, uphill on the other. Combined with evenly spaced trees along the path, the set-up is ideal for interval training: downhill jog/run, followed by an uphill power walk or jog, then sprinting intervals between the trees, followed by walking lunges, skipping, and/or side-shuffling.

2. Go back to school. Most junior highs and high schools have tracks that are accessible to the public. Quarter-mile tracks make it easy to track your distance and they are also “give” more than concrete and cement, lessening the impact on leg joints. The green space in the middle of the track is a great place to practice agility drills, such as zigzag runs and shuffles. Run the stadium stairs and use the benches for push-ups and dips.

3. Make working out an adventure. State parks and metro parks have an abundance of hiking trails set amidst beautiful scenery that changes with each season. If you like to run, take advantage of the varying terrain to improve your agility and kinesthetic awareness. Some of the hills are rough, so practice common sense: watch your footing to avoid stumps, rocks and bumps that you could trip over; keep an eye out for poisonous plants like poison ivy; and take your cell phone with you.

4. Head for the hills. Hills, especially sledding hills, can really turn on the burn. Running hill repeats, side skipping, and walking backward uphill works every leg muscle and challenges your cardiovascular system as well.

5. Play like a kid. When was the last time you did the monkey bars? It’s hard! Wear a pair of weight lifting gloves (available at most all-purpose stores, such as Wal-Mart or Target) to protect your hands and give the monkey bars a try. Challenge yourself to try pull-ups and chin-ups too. Use a low step for reverse leg lunges. Take [resistance tubing](#) with you and use the playground structure as your anchor for performing countless strength exercises, such as rows, overhead presses, and bicep curls. Want cardio? Take a jump rope with you.

6. Play with your kids. You’ll earn your smoothie after an afternoon game of tag, kickball, flag football or catch with your kids. As an added bonus, children who have active parents typically grow up to be active adults, so you’ll be setting a good example.

7. Practice backyard basics. If your backyard is like mine, it probably has some bumps, dips and many small rocks, creating an uneven surface. Try doing walking lunges across the yard. It is a much different experience than doing them on the flat gym floor. The uneven surface challenges the assisting muscles in the upper leg, as well as the stabilizing muscles of the hip, knee and ankle joints. Because you use those joints and muscles regularly in daily living, it makes sense to challenge them in ways that mimic real life scenarios. If this setting inspires the child in you, try crab and bear walks, inchworm push-ups, or mountain climbers.

8. Take your equipment with you. If you have small hand weights, weighted balls, resistance tubing and/or a jump rope, consider taking it with you to the park. Park benches can double as weight benches, railings can be used as an anchor for resistance tubing and the jump rope, well, that can be used anywhere and it is a fun way to get your heart pumping. If you haven't jumped in a while, start slowly – 10-20 seconds for beginners. Over time, work up to 2, 5, even 10 minutes. Try to beat your own record each time.

9. Learn something new. Tennis, basketball, swimming, cycling, kayaking, horse back riding and rock climbing are just a few activities you can try. Attempting something out of your comfort zone is a great way to boost self-confidence. You'll surely meet new people, and you never know – you might discover an inner athlete in you that you didn't know existed.

10. Sites and Cityscapes. If you live in a metropolitan area that has little green space, fear not – there are still plenty of opportunities here for working out. Take your elastic tubing and tie it around you waste, then head to the nearest set of stairs (think Rocky in Balboa here). Go for a jog, run up the stairs, use the railing as an anchor for your tubing, then knock out a set of squats. If there is a hill nearby, try walking lunges up the hill. No railing in sight? Use a tree, or even a parking meter. Be creative – that is half the fun!

Safety Concerns

Remember -- no workout is effective if it isn't safe.

Some Do's and Don'ts:

- Do follow the rules of the road. If you have to walk/jog on the road, be sure to go against traffic. If biking, go with traffic and be sure to wear a helmet. Stay alert to potential hazards, such as rocks and wet patches.
- Do wear sunscreen - the sun's harmful rays span all four seasons.
- Don't visit places you aren't familiar with, especially at night.
- Do take a buddy, especially if you will be in unfamiliar surroundings.
- Do abide by park hours. Most parks are off-limits from dusk to dawn.
- Do watch the weather and dress appropriately.
- Do drink plenty of water before your workout and take a water bottle with you.
- Do wear quality footwear that is designed for the activity you'll be doing.
- Do take your cell phone and tell someone where you'll be working out.

The outdoors, with its varied terrain and natural beauty, can do more for your mind, body and spirit than you ever imagined. But as long as you're still looking out the steamy window of your indoor gym while logging yet one more mile on the treadmill (yawn), you'll never know.

About the Author:

Diane Raymond is a noted fitness expert and the founder of [Blue Sky Gym](#), a personal training business specializing in outdoor and in-home training, group classes, live workshops and health/fitness education.

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