

Health Benefits of Green Outdoor Spaces for Seniors.

By Victoria Di Felice

The author holds a Master of Science in Management at Ted Rogers School of Management and a Bachelor of Science from McMaster University. She is a second-year law student at the University of Western Ontario's Faculty of Law.

There is a consensus in the literature that access to green outdoor spaces have both mental and physical health benefits for seniors. The leading study on the association between green spaces near residences and the longevity of senior citizens in large cities found that living in areas with walkable green spaces positively influences the longevity of urban senior citizens independent of their age, sex, marital status, or baseline functional status. The study defined “walkable green spaces” as any open green space near the senior’s residence.¹ A 2020 study found that the positive effects of green spaces are felt particularly in neighbourhoods that are characterized by lower income elderly populations.² These findings were confirmed in a recent 2021 study published in the International Journal of Environment Health Research.³ The 2021 study analyzes the benefits of outdoor parks in the light of Covid-19. The paper notes that the size of the green space influences the activity level of individuals. Well-designed large outdoor environments have a positive effect on the physical activity levels and psychological well-being of elderly individuals. Importantly, the study notes that the health of elderly individuals is most influenced by their immediate outdoor environment compared to other age groups because of their decreased mobility. The study concludes that there is a need to improve immediate outdoor greenspace near senior’s residences.

In addition to the multiple studies demonstrating the need for green spaces near senior’s residences, a 2014 City staff report directed to the Board of Health highlighted that “abundant, diverse and well-maintained green spaces are important features of a healthy city.” The staff report details the myriad of both physical and mental benefits of green space and notes that the term “green space” refers to a “wide variety of natural and landscaped areas both publicly and privately owned.” It includes private yards and open spaces. The city emphasizes that “the health benefits of green space are more strongly associated with green space that is in close proximity (less than 1 km) to residential areas.” The staff report specifically notes the importance of green space “in areas near vulnerable populations including people living on low-income, racialized groups, and older adults,” noting that improving green space in areas where senior citizens are living is necessary to promote health.⁴

REFERENCE: Green City: Why Nature Matters to Health September 4, 2015 City Staff Report from Medical Officer of Health <https://www.toronto.ca/legdocs/mmis/2015/hl/bgrd/backgroundfile-83420.pdf>

¹ Takano, T., Nakamura, K., & Watanabe, M. (2002). Urban residential environments and senior citizens’ longevity in megacity areas: the importance of walkable green spaces. *Journal of Epidemiology & Community Health*, 56(12), 913-918.

² Dennis, M., Cook, P. A., James, P., Wheeler, C. P., & Lindley, S. J. (2020). Relationships between health outcomes in older populations and urban green infrastructure size, quality and proximity. *BMC public health*, 20(1), 1-15.

³ Levinger, P., Cerin, E., Milner, C., & Hill, K. D. (2021). Older people and nature: the benefits of outdoors, parks and nature in light of COVID-19 and beyond—where to from here?. *International Journal of Environmental Health Research*, 1-8.

⁴ <https://www.toronto.ca/legdocs/mmis/2015/hl/bgrd/backgroundfile-83420.pdf>