

Attention, desk jockeys: ditching the cubicle and computer screen this summer can be good for your health.

While the hazards of summer—sunburn, bug bites, swimmer’s itch and so forth—are well-known, the hot season offers plenty of health advantages the desk-bound may overlook.

Dr. David Rakel, an associate professor of family medicine at the University of Wisconsin and medical director of the UW Health Integrative Medicine program, said the human body needs to connect with nature and the outdoors to build greater immunity to disease.

“A theory called ‘hygiene hypothesis’ suggests we are staying too clean by remaining indoors with our hand sanitizer and anti-bacterial soap, and not training our immune system to become fully developed,” he said. “There’s some promising research that shows kids who grow up playing in the dirt and on farms actually have less asthma and allergic rashes of the skin. In essence, kids who are exposed to bacteria and elements in nature train their immune systems to be better balanced, so in the long run, they may remain healthier.”

Rakel said getting outside at any time of the year, including the winter, is helpful. But the summer sun seems to provide even greater benefits, so long as it’s done in moderation and the skin is not over-exposed.

“It could be the longer days,” he said. “You also get to appreciate the sense of community. There are more picnics, more triathlons, and more family reunions. People are leaving their homes and making social connections, which are important to good health.”

Rakel adds that nature also has a positive impact on mood, and he often finds that his patients are less dependent on anti-depressants when it’s sunny and warm outside.

“It’s what research and common sense are pointing at,” he said. “If I’m out in nature surrounded by beautiful trees, blooming flowers, watching my child play soccer with my neighbors, I’m going

to perceive that as a more positive experience than sitting inside a cubicle with recycled air.”

Rakel said the good feelings that come from being outside trigger the release of neuropeptides, which are proteins in the brain that have a positive effect on the overall function of the body when triggered by positive perceptions.

“If your mind is cluttered with the stresses of the day like the big project you have at work or your child not doing well in school, take a walk in nature and concentrate your attention on the flowers, the beautiful pine trees or the bumble bee,” he said. “That can be a great opportunity to get your mind out of its chaotic stories.”

Katherine Bonus, founder of the mindfulness program for the UW Health integrative medicine program, said connecting with the outdoors can be tantamount to meditation.

“It could serve as a simple meditation practice for all the times we feel too busy to notice we are alive, too busy to notice it’s summer and too busy to remember both are impermanent,” she said. “Step outside several times a day, feel the sun and wind on your skin, notice the sights and sounds of summer, and enjoy those moments.”