

Health Professional Fact Sheet

Parks for Health and Wellbeing - Social connection

Access to parks and green spaces plays an important role in creating healthy, happy communities, offering a chance to be active in the outdoors, connect with nature, and socialise. Loneliness and social isolation are increasingly common, especially in vulnerable, elderly and culturally and linguistically diverse communities, but also amongst youth and new parents. Identifying local parks offering group-based activities can help build a sense of belonging and community, boosting wellbeing and resilience.

Social isolation, loneliness and health

It is widely accepted that humans are more disconnected from nature than ever before. This disconnect has many significant impacts on people, among them an increase in social isolation. Evidence suggests that up to 20% of GP visits are for social rather than physical health issues. These patients often experience social isolation, which can have serious implications for mental and physical health. Research indicates that the effects of social factors such as loneliness and social isolation on mental and physical health are often underestimated. Social isolation and loneliness have been linked to higher risks for a variety of physical and mental conditions: high blood pressure, heart disease, obesity, a weakened immune system, anxiety, depression, cognitive decline, Alzheimer's disease, and premature death.

Further, social isolation and loneliness is associated with less favourable lifestyles. Research shows that greater social isolation in older men and women has correlations with reduced everyday physical activity and greater sedentary time. This may contribute to an increased risk of ill-health and decreased wellbeing. The diagnosis of a physical or mental health condition may also lead to poorer quality of life and an increased risk of social isolation.

There are a range of physical, social and cultural barriers that influence social isolation for people of all ages. These include language barriers, moving to a new location, mental and physical health challenges, and costs associated with group activities. Removing these barriers can assist individuals to become more socially connected, improving their physical and mental wellbeing.

Parks are part of the solution

There is a strong body of evidence that regular contact with green spaces and nature boosts happiness, sense of life purpose and feelings of social connection. Being involved in nature-based activities can help build social skills, support greater engagement and increase physical activity, all of which contribute an individual's health and wellbeing. A strong sense of place has been shown to be closely tied to a sense of community, pointing towards increased contact with nature creating more cohesive communities.

Activities in nature such as volunteering or group-based walking are free, provide a sense of accomplishment and comradery that boosts life satisfaction, and builds a range of new skills that can be shared. 'Social prescribing' (or community referral) is an approach that links a community member to non-medical sources of support or resources in the community which are likely to help with the health concerns they are experiencing. It has been used with a range of client groups and provides opportunities to access a variety of different community-based services.

Parks provide highly suitable settings for social prescribing as there are additional associated benefits of being in nature, such as fresh air, natural sounds, relaxing landscapes, and interactions with flora and fauna, all of which can improve mood and decrease stress.



Welcome walk at Lysterfield Park (photograph by Parks Victoria).

Next steps

Victoria's parks and waterways provide inspiring and relaxing settings for our community to improve their wellbeing and social connections across all life stages. Consider recommending a park-based activity such as:

Park walks: an organised guided group walk in a park is a great way to encourage physical activity while meeting new people. There are volunteer-led walks for all abilities on offer in many parks. These walks are great for fostering improved mental health and wellbeing.

Volunteering: there are volunteer activities for every age group, skill and ability type. Most volunteer activities are group based and all are free.

Organised outdoor activities: Parks Victoria can connect you to a range of other outdoor group activities such as camping, canoeing, sailing, bushwalking and more.

Visit www.parks.vic.gov.au to find a park near you

- [Find out about guided Park walks](#)
- [Find out about volunteering opportunities in parks](#)
- Health professional resources and tools (coming soon)

This information is not intended as a substitute for professional medical advice, diagnosis or treatment