



What Can an Allotment Do For You?

Just half an hour in the allotment can have both physical and mental health benefits.

The National Allotment Society welcomed a new study by researchers at the Universities of Westminster and Essex, which has found that even a small amount of participation in allotment gardening can have significant benefits on health. Their findings are published in the Journal of Public Health.

We would like to echo the sentiments of Professor John Ashton below; this report affirms our view that allotments make a significant contribution to the health and well-being of citizens and we would argue that this should be acknowledged by councils in their Health and Well-being Policies and their allotment services be expanded and protected.

The study used 269 participants, both allotment gardeners and non-gardeners, to determine the effect of allotment gardening on self-esteem and mood. These two factors, the study explained, are key indicators of mental well-being and long-term disease risk. They found that one session of allotment gardening can result in significant improvements in both self-esteem and mood, via reductions in tension, depression, anger, and confusion. The study included a large variation of participants - in terms of income and employment deprivation, health and disability deprivation, education and skills training, barriers to housing, crime and living environment – from ten allotment sites in North West England.

Participants completed a questionnaire before and after the allotment sessions which included questions on self-esteem and enjoyment, as well as data such as body mass index (BMI). They were also asked questions on length of time they spent doing allotment gardening. The researchers discovered that neither the amount of time spent allotment gardening in the particular session, or how long the participants had been doing allotment gardening for significantly contributed to changes in self-esteem or mood, as co-author Dr Carly Wood explained: “Participants who attend an allotment for a short period just once per week can experience a similar magnitude of improvements in self-esteem and mood as participants who attend more regularly for longer periods of time.”

Dr Wood also commented on the impact these findings could have on public health policy: “Health organizations and policy makers should consider the potential of allotment gardening as a long-term tool for combatting ill-health. Local public authorities should seek to provide community allotment plots to allow residents to have regular opportunities to partake.”

As well as significant improvements in mental well-being, the study also found that the allotment gardeners had significantly lower BMI than those who did not participate in gardening. 68% of the non-gardening group were overweight or obese, compared with just 47% of the gardeners.

The authors concluded that allotment gardening “could contribute to a greener and healthier economy focused on the prevention of ill-health. This preventative approach could result in substantial savings to the UK economy, particularly in the treatment of health conditions such as mental illness, obesity, cardiovascular disease and loneliness.”

Professor John Ashton, President of the UK Faculty of Public Health added to this sentiment:

“For too long, the stigma and shame wrongly associated with mental illness has contributed to unhelpful notions about treating physical and mental health separately. We cannot have good physical health without also looking after our mental wellbeing. FPH would welcome more community allotments and opportunities for people to have access to safe, green spaces. Because there are long waiting lists for allotments, we need a strategy that considers how we could make better use of neglected land that marks the transition from towns to cities. Given the cost to individuals and the economy of poor mental health, it makes sense from both a public health and economic perspective to prioritise mental wellbeing.”

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