

Five GP practices in Edinburgh to prescribe 'nature' as part of patients' treatment

GPs at five practices in Edinburgh, East Craigs Medical Centre, Leith Mount Surgery, Inchpark Surgery, St Triduana's Medical Practice and Mill Lane Surgery have started prescribing nature as part of a new collaboration between RSPB Scotland and Edinburgh and Lothians Health Foundation, the official charity of NHS Lothian.

Over the next five months, GPs at five practices in Edinburgh will be able to prescribe nature to patients as part of their treatment, thanks to an innovative project designed by RSPB Scotland, in collaboration with NHS Lothian's charity partner, the Edinburgh and Lothian's Health Foundation, and local GPs.





The practices are participating in a five-month trial of Nature Prescriptions, an initiative inspired by growing evidence that connecting with nature makes us healthier and happier.

Nature Prescriptions started in Shetland in 2017 as a partnership between RSPB Scotland and NHS Shetland and was successfully rolled out to all ten GP practices across Shetland in 2018. The new Edinburgh pilot aims to investigate whether Nature Prescriptions can be delivered in a similar way in an urban environment, and to explore the potential for extending it throughout Scotland.

Once again, RSPB Scotland has used their knowledge and understanding of connecting people with nature to produce a leaflet and a calendar of ideas, this time specific to Edinburgh. These materials have been designed to help patients connect with nature in a variety of ways and are provided, where needed, alongside regular prescriptions as part of a range of health treatments prescribed by their GP.

The Edinburgh pilot was due to begin in March this year but was paused as GP Practices dealt with the demands of the onset of Covid-19. Since then, many people have developed a new awareness and appreciation of local greenspaces, with numerous reports of people finding comfort in nature during lockdown. The RSPB has also seen an increase in the number of people sharing sightings of birds and wildlife that they had never noticed before.

Ian Mackenzie, Green Health Programme Manager for Edinburgh and Lothians Health Foundation said: "Improving the health and wellbeing of people and communities across Edinburgh and the Lothians is at the heart of everything we do at the Foundation and we are delighted to work with RSPB Scotland and the local GP Practices to support this project. Greenspace-based activities have an important role to play in supporting wider community and public health, with everyday contact with nature having a positive impact on mental health and wellbeing and reducing stress. This is backed up by a growing evidence base from organisations including the World Health Organisation and NICE that shows contact with nature and access to greenspace is good for our health.

As part of our Greenspace and Health strategy, the Nature Prescriptions pilot is a great opportunity to test out how we can unlock these benefits for more people. In urban areas such as Edinburgh, we often overlook the nature on our doorsteps and miss out on the potential benefits. Through this project we are looking forward to exploring how GPs can use their local greenspaces to help their patients."

Dr Sara Hornibrook from Leith Mount Surgery said: "The GPs are really looking forward to participating in this pilot. Prescribing nature is a wonderful idea, particularly with all the green spaces and coastal areas that Edinburgh has to offer."

Dr Madeleine Housden from East Craigs Medical Centre said:

“Now, more than ever, people are realising the importance of getting outdoors. Nature prescribing is a great way for patients to access the benefits of being in nature, from improving physical fitness to restoring mental wellbeing. There’s never been a better time to try it!”

Anne McCall, Director of RSPB Scotland said: “We are delighted at the enthusiastic response that Nature Prescriptions has received so far and are really excited about extending the Shetland project into an urban environment. We are extremely grateful to Edinburgh and Lothians Health Foundation for working with us and to the five GP Practices in Edinburgh for agreeing to take part in this pilot. By working together, we hope to learn how best to deliver Nature Prescriptions and then to use this as a basis for exploring the possibility of extending the initiative across the whole of Scotland.”

Elaine Bradley, RSPB Scotland’s Project Development Executive for Nature Prescriptions said: “I think that it’s the simplicity of the project that makes it so appealing. We use our knowledge of nature to identify local activities and ideas which support GPs in prescribing nature, where appropriate, as part of a patient’s treatment plan. Individuals benefit because connecting with nature can improve physical and mental wellbeing, and nature benefits because connecting with nature often inspires people to want to protect it.”

There is growing evidence that connecting with nature provides a range of health benefits including: improved cardiovascular health; enhanced immune function; reduced stress, anxiety and fatigue; improved concentration; and increases in life satisfaction and happiness.

While spending time in natural environments and exercising outdoors can, in itself, be good for our wellbeing, Nature Prescriptions involves more than simply being outdoors. It’s also about connecting with nature in ways that are personal, emotional and meaningful. For example, some of the activities

suggested in the Edinburgh Calendar include: tuning in to the changing seasons, finding a favourite place in nature, listening to nearby birdsong, noticing the unique beauty of the surrounding landscape, reflecting on a favourite nature experience, getting to know a neighbourhood tree, and helping local wildlife thrive.

Elaine explains: “By actively noticing and engaging with nature, we can cultivate a sense of curiosity, joy and appreciation that is positive for our wellbeing and for the conservation of the natural world. As nature restores and nurtures us, we deepen our concern and care for nature, and it is this reciprocal relationship that is at the heart of Nature Prescriptions.”