

Those trees could be keeping the doctor away: UNB study

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The more nature you're surrounded by in the city, the better your chances of avoiding death by several common diseases in Canada, suggests a new study led by a UNB researcher. PHOTO: DAILY GLEANER ARCHIVE

The greener your city neighbourhood, the less likely you are to die from several common causes, a new UNB-led study says.

Dr. Daniel Crouse, an epidemiologist and sociology research associate on the Fredericton campus of the University of New Brunswick, led a team of 11 researchers to analyze census data from 2001, with data from the Canadian mortality database and to annual income tax filings through to 2011, to compare causes of death in Canadian cities to how much natural environment was out their front door.

They found the risk of dying from several common causes - including cardiovascular and respiratory diseases - were reduced by eight to 12 per cent for Canadians who lived in greener areas in cities across Canada.

“We found shockingly protective effects associated with increased exposure,” Crouse said in a UNB release. “The size of effects we found were much stronger than what we expected.”

The peer-reviewed study was published in the October edition of the *Lancet Planetary Health* journal.

Researchers used the data to take into account trees and other vegetation within 250 metres of each individual’s home, allowing the researchers to estimate daily “greenness” exposure, according to the study.

Taking into account environmental and socioeconomic characteristics of the communities, the researchers said they also found that the wealthier among us have greater nature-inspired health benefits because they tend to live in greener neighbourhoods.

“The key finding I guess is that every day our residential exposure to green vegetation seems to have really important benefits to health,” Crouse said. “Those residential exposures are having a big positive effect.”

Crouse said the findings could be of value to urban planners.

“For example, if a city had x amount of money to spend on urban greening and they had to decide: ‘Should we build a new park or add more trees to our existing park?’ ... I think this is showing there’s a lot of value in adding more trees around the city generally so it’s not just in localized pockets. Having green space in medians and in other public areas has benefits as well.”