

Summer at the Seashore

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In the northern hemisphere we are in the homestretch of less structured days, flip flops and fireflies before the start of school bus pickups and corduroys. Up and down the coasts, beaches are chock full of vacationers. Why is the seashore such a draw for summer holiday? What is it about a walk along the beach, a swim in the ocean, and an evening bonfire that lifts our spirits and restores a sense of wellbeing? As I soak in the seasonal delights of summer with friends and family, I smile at the unconscious wisdom of spending a bit of summer at the seashore to reduce stress and promote health.



[Photo Credit](#)

Summer at the Seashore - Sand, Sun, Surf, S'mores & Sweet Corn:

1. Sand: Pitching a sun umbrella at high tide to wiggle our toes in the sand while listening to the waves crash amidst children's delighted squeals intuitively seems good for our mental health. [Researchers in Scandinavia sought to quantify that benefit.](#) It is no surprise that vacation is associated with improved mood and reduced stress for the vacationer, but the benefits spread well beyond the vacationing worker to our family, friends, and even our colleagues. [In fact, as more people within a society take their allotted vacation, antidepressant use declines logarithmically.](#) But American employees are taking fewer vacation days compared to any time in recent history. Not good for the individual. Not good for society. So next time you wonder whether you can get away, maybe you will feel less guilty about heading to sandy shores for some R&R if you remember that the sand between your toes is good for you and is in the interest of the greater good, too!

2. Sun: Whether you prefer an early morning walk along the beach or volleyball in the full noonday sun, we all enjoy being outside on a beautiful summer day - and it is good for us. Dispensing a multitude of benefits, sensible exposure to the sun's ultraviolet B (UVB) rays

- just 15 minutes for a very fair skinned person to a couple of hours for a dark skinned person - enables us to make all the vitamin D our bodies need for the day. It also induces the production of beta-endorphin in the skin, which makes us feel good. Vitamin D deficiency has been associated with seasonal affective disorder and depression, and although there are other sources of Vitamin D, a reasonable dose of sunshine is good for our mental health. And even better, SPF15 sunblock does not interfere with Vitamin D production, which also makes our dermatologists happy.

3. S'mores: A summer bonfire is not complete without those warm, gooey chocolate & marshmallow treats sandwiched between two graham crackers. Almost everyone I know likes making s'mores more than eating them, but there is something about these sweet indulgences that might actually be good for our health. Cocoa has been used medicinally for over two thousand years, since the time of the Mayan and Aztec civilization. Today's research tells us that consuming chocolate is associated with improved cognitive function and mood. Further studies are needed to better understand the pharmacological actions of chocolate cocoa flavonoids, but I'm not holding my breath for the results.

4. Surf: We know that physical activity is good for mental health, and sports that require sustained concentration and body awareness can be particularly therapeutic. There must be something about surfing - listening to and moving with the rhythm of the waves, patiently awaiting the right moment to catch a ride- that is particularly good for our mental state. In fact, a program called the Wave Project in the UK uses surfing to help young people reduce anxiety and improve their emotional health. Another program, Ocean Therapy, helps Marines with PTSD learn to ride the waves of their symptoms through surfing.

5. Sweet corn: An apple a day keeps the doctor away, but could eating fruits and vegetables also influence mental health? In fact, you can think about those farm stands you pass on the way to the beach as organic pharmacies. Emerging research indicates that bacteria in the gastrointestinal tract can activate neural pathways that impact brain development, mood, and behavior. Gut microbiota interacts bi-directionally with diet and stress and is a promising potential area for new prevention and treatment strategies for anxiety and depression.

So, if you are enjoying the homestretch of summer, here's to hoping it will be filled with all the mental health benefits of sun, sand, surf, s'mores and sweet corn. If you are in the part of the world heading into springtime, just remember summer is next up!