

## **Feel better in the forest**

Everyone who enjoys the great outdoors, knows how good it feels to spend time in nature. The fresh air, being surrounded by trees, and the sound of birdsong all have a calming effect on us. Connecting with nature becomes more and more important in our urbanized and digital world. A good way to achieve this, is through the Japanese practice of Forest Bathing (or Shinrin Yoku). The name might have you thinking that you need to go into water to forest bathe, but that is not the case. During a forest bathing session, we bath our senses in the atmosphere of the forest. No swimsuit necessary!

Forest bathing is all about slowing down and balancing mind and body. You do this by consciously connecting your five senses to nature. You focus on what you can see, hear, smell, taste, and touch. When you go on a forest bathing walk, a guide will give you a series of forest bathing invitations. Those invitations are nature-based exercises that will help you to open your senses and connect with nature and yourself. For example, you take a very slow walk, while you notice everything around you that is moving. Or you discover the forest floor with your sense of touch and smell.

Forest bathing is not a hike or an athletic activity. Typically, a walk lasts for two or more hours, but you only cover one or two kilometres. The big difference is that you don't pass through nature but that you stop, stand still, and do nothing in order to connect with nature. It's a mindful activity where you focus on the here and now.

Forest bathing started in Japan in the 1980's. Since then, scientific studies have shown that it has lots of health benefits. So much so that it has become an accepted part of the Japanese preventative health care because of the positive effects on mental and physical health.

## **The benefits of forest bathing**

Let's look at the effect of forest bathing on the mental health first. Going on regular forest bathing walks releases stress and anxiety and can help you to relax. It turns off worrying and obsessive thinking, helps with anger, fatigue, and sadness, and improves feelings of happiness and restores our mood. Forest bathing improves your concentration, helps you to think more clearly, and increases your attention span. It also opens up creativity and increases creative problem solving. It improves sleeping patterns, makes you feel refreshed and gives you new energy.

Our physical health can also improve by forest bathing. For example, it lowers blood pressure and boosts your immune system. It decreases inflammation and increases natural killer cell activity. It improves cardiovascular and metabolic health. It also relieves sore muscles and accelerates recovery from illness and trauma.

When you go forest bathing in a group it also gives a sense of belonging and community which reduces feelings of loneliness. During a forest bathing walk we talk about what we see around us and what is happening at that moment. We connect with each other without judgement or competition. We come as we are, and everybody is equal.

Scientific studies show that participants benefit most when they go on forest bathing trips every one to four weeks. The more often you can go, the better. Positive results were still seen seven to thirty days later. Scientists suggest that because of this, forest bathing may have a preventative effect on the development of diseases.

That spending time in the forest is so beneficial for our health has multiple reasons. The most obvious one is that there is a higher concentration of oxygen, compared to urban areas. Another

reason is that plants and trees release chemicals called phytoncides. These are natural essential oils that are part of a plant's defence system against bacteria, insects, and fungi. They also have a positive effect on humans. By breathing them in, they boost our immune system. And then there is the soil on the forest floor. Forest soils are among the most diverse microbial habitats on Earth. Soil microbes help regulate our emotions and immune response.

**Where can you go forest bathing in Wicklow?**

My name is Cathelijne (or Cat for short). I am a qualified forest bathing guide and I organise forest bathing sessions in multiple locations all over county Wicklow. I am originally from the Netherlands and moved to Ireland in 2015 because I fell in love with the natural landscape of the emerald isle. After working as a certified national tour guide for more than seven years, I trained as a forest bathing guide in 2021 to share the benefits I experienced in nature with others. My way of guiding is very down to earth and accessible for everyone. I will create a safe space in the forest and help you to be mindful and connect with nature and yourself in a fun way.

Take a look at my website for more information and upcoming events:

[www.forestbathingwicklow.com](http://www.forestbathingwicklow.com)

Or connect with me on Instagram: [www.instagram.com/forestbathingwicklow](https://www.instagram.com/forestbathingwicklow)