

# Wellbeing Insights



## *Affirming Indigenous Wisdom:* Growing in Health Through Nature and Attentiveness

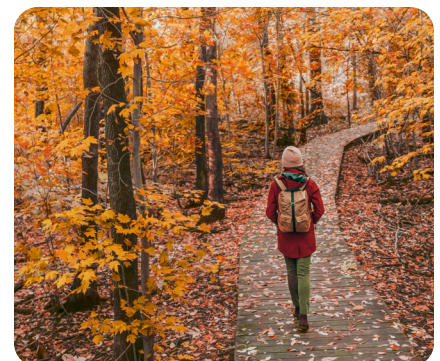
Every November, we pause to recognize Indigenous American Heritage Month, a time to honor the traditions, resilience, and contributions of Indigenous peoples across this land. But affirming Indigenous heritage is not just about remembering history; it's also about listening, learning, and allowing the wisdom of these traditions to help guide us toward healthier, more grounded ways of living.

Continued on page 2

### In This Issue

- 01 [Affirming Indigenous Wisdom: Growing in Health Through Nature and Attentiveness](#)
- 03 [Mindful Minute: Natural Observation](#)
- 04 [On the Menu: Season's Bounty: A Guide to Winter Squash](#)
- 05 [Quick Moves, Sharper Minds: How High-Reflex Sports Boost Brain Health](#)

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# Affirming Indigenous Wisdom: Growing in Health Through Nature and Attentiveness

Continued from page 1

One of the most enduring gifts from the wide variety of Indigenous cultures is the deep connection between nature, attentiveness, and health. Where modern wellness often emphasizes speed and efficiency, we can be reminded that health is not just the absence of illness; it is wholeness, which involves being in balance with the earth, community, and spirit.

## The Healing Power of Nature

For numerous Indigenous nations, the land is not just a backdrop to life; it is life itself. Rivers, mountains, animals, and plants are not resources to be consumed but relatives to be respected. This worldview reshapes how we think about wellness.

Modern research continues to affirm what Indigenous peoples have known for centuries: time in nature lowers stress, improves mental health, reduces inflammation, and boosts creativity. But beyond the purely scientific realm, there is something sacred about stepping outside and remembering that we belong to a living world. To walk a wooded trail, to listen to the birds sing, to watch the sun rise or set, to breathe deeply of mountain air, to sit in silence — these are moments of healing. They invite us to return to balance.

During this month, you might honor Indigenous heritage by spending more time outdoors, not solely as exercise, but as attentiveness. When walking your dog, begin with gratitude for what your body can do and the land that supports us. In the forest, walk with curiosity. When preparing your garden for winter or raking leaves, treat it as an opportunity to release burdens and make way for new life. When watching the sunrise, let it remind you of renewal and hope.

## The Rhythm of Everyday Ritual

Wellness grows when we learn to pay attention. To be mindful merely means paying attention to what already holds our attention. To pause and watch. To taste our food or drink. To feel the weather on our skin. To notice how deep or shallow our breath is in a moment. These moments do not need to be grand or dramatic. Consistent, persistent moments of attentiveness throughout the day can bring a great sense of peace and calm, even in the midst of stress.



## Growing Our Own Health Through Indigenous Wisdom

So how do we carry these lessons forward, not by taking from Indigenous cultures, but honoring them?

- **Practice gratitude for the land.** Each time you step outside, notice what is growing, moving, or changing. Give thanks for the air you breathe, the water you drink, and the ground beneath your feet.
- **Make time for attentiveness.** Create small daily practices that root you in presence; morning reflection, mindful walks, or quiet pauses between tasks such as taking three deep breaths after sending an email.
- **Listen and learn.** Seek out the voices of Indigenous leaders, writers, and storytellers who share their experiences and wisdom. Honor that these traditions belong to specific peoples. (Try *The Seven Circles: Indigenous Teachings for Living Well* by Thosh Collins and Chelsey Luger).
- **See health as balance.** Move beyond the checklist of diet and exercise to consider your relationships, surroundings, and own rhythms.

By opening ourselves to these quiet moments and walking attentively through the world, we begin to restore balance in our bodies, minds, and communities. In this way, honoring Indigenous wisdom becomes not only an act of remembrance but a path to living more fully, more gently, and more connected to the life that surrounds us.



## MINDFUL MINUTE

# Natural Observation

This exercise is designed to connect us with the beauty of nature by helping us slow down to view the marvelous world around us.

Identify something natural near you, such as a flower, tree, cloud or stone. Spend a minute or two closely observing it. Provide your undivided attention, noticing its details as if you were seeing it for the first time. Get curious and explore its shape, color and movement. What role is it playing in nature?

Try this technique to elevate your brisk autumn walks: Pick an object like a tree that's in the distance and notice how the details become clearer as you approach. Keep in mind, you don't have to be outdoors for natural observation. It's a great way to connect with nature when you're stuck indoors, too; all you need is a window!

# Season's Bounty: A Guide to Winter Squash

As the days grow shorter and fresh produce becomes harder to find, winter squash steps up to brighten our kitchens. These hearty gourds are nutrient-dense, versatile, and naturally sweet, making them a perfect addition to cozy fall and winter meals. It can be intimidating to work with a squash you've never cooked with before, but there is a pretty universal way to roast any squash. Check out our "after roasting" tips for each type below for simple recipe starters.

## How to Roast Any Squash

1. Preheat your oven to 400°F (200°C).
2. Slice your squash in half (carefully) and scoop out the seeds.
3. Brush the cut sides with a little olive oil and sprinkle with salt and pepper.
4. Place cut-side down on a baking sheet and roast for 30–45 minutes, until the flesh is tender.

*Here are six of the most common and delicious varieties of squash to try this season:*



**Butternut** — With its smooth, bright orange flesh and naturally sweet flavor, butternut is a crowd favorite.

*After roasting:* Scoop out the flesh and mash with a touch of butter, salt, pepper and garlic. Top with pepitas and chives for a quick side dish.



**Spaghetti** — This oval, golden squash transforms into tender, spaghetti-like strands once roasted.

*After roasting:* Scrape into strands, top with marinara sauce, and sprinkle with parmesan.



**Acorn** — Recognizable by its ridged, acorn-like shape, this squash is mild and slightly nutty.

*After roasting:* Fill the hollow center with cooked quinoa, dried cranberries, and a sprinkle of feta.



**Kabocha** — Sometimes called the "Japanese pumpkin," kabocha is deeply sweet with a fluffy, chestnut-like texture.

*After roasting:* Purée the flesh with vegetable broth, a bit of heavy cream, salt, pepper, garlic and ginger for a quick, comforting soup.



**Delicata** — Nicknamed the "sweet potato squash," delicata has thin, edible skin and a creamy, sweet interior.

*After roasting:* Slice into rings and toss with arugula, goat cheese, toasted pecans, and a drizzle of olive oil and balsamic vinegar for a warm salad.



**Buttercup** — Dark green and squat, buttercup squash has a rich, sweet flavor and creamy interior.

*After roasting:* Mash and stir in a drizzle of maple syrup and a pinch of cinnamon for a naturally sweet treat.

# Quick Moves, Sharper Minds: How High-Reflex Sports Boost Brain Health

In the fast-paced world of modern work, maintaining peak mental performance is just as important as staying physically active. But did you know that certain sports, specifically those requiring quick reflexes, can sharpen your brain while keeping you fit? Whether you're fielding a tennis serve, dodging a jab in boxing, or making a snap pass in basketball, engaging in high-reflex sports can have powerful effects on your cognitive function.

High-reflex sports are activities that require rapid responses, hand-eye coordination, and quick decision-making. Think racket sports, martial arts, or fast-paced team games. These activities demand both mental agility and physical dexterity, a combination that's great news for your brain.

## How High Reflex Sports Support Brain Health

### 1. *Enhanced Cognitive Function*

Sports like tennis, badminton and basketball challenge your brain to make split-second decisions, track fast-moving objects, and anticipate opponents' actions. This constant mental engagement helps build stronger neural circuits for reaction time, hand-eye coordination, and strategic thinking.

### 2. *Improved Memory and Focus*

Playing fast-paced sports means staying dialed in for every serve, pass, or punch. This high level of concentration improves focus and stimulates brain regions involved in memory formation and recall. Repeated engagement can lead to more lasting improvements in cognitive attention and retention.

### 3. *Reduced Stress and Anxiety*

Like all forms of exercise, high-reflex sports trigger the release of endorphins — your brain's natural feel-good chemicals. These endorphins help reduce cortisol levels (the stress hormone) and ease symptoms of anxiety, promoting better overall emotional wellbeing.

### 4. *Boosts Neuroplasticity*

Neuroplasticity refers to the brain's ability to reorganize itself by forming new neural connections. The dynamic nature of high-reflex sports, where no two plays are the same, forces the brain to adapt constantly. This "mental workout" strengthens the brain's flexibility and problem-solving capacity.

Continued on page 6



# Quick Moves, Sharper Minds: How High-Reflex Sports Boost Brain Health

Continued from page 5

## 5. Increased Brain Connectivity

Participating in complex, quick-response sports has been linked to enhanced communication between different brain regions. This improved brain connectivity supports coordination, decision-making, and higher-order thinking.

## 6. Slows Age-Related Cognitive Decline

Regularly challenging the brain through high-reflex sports can help maintain cognitive function as you age. Studies show that active adults engaged in mentally stimulating sports tend to experience slower declines in executive function and processing speed over time.

## 7. Improves Reaction Time and Processing Speed

High-reflex sports like table tennis and boxing train the brain to process information rapidly. For example, reacting to a ping pong ball moving at high speed can significantly improve how quickly the brain interprets visual cues and sends motor commands.

## 8. Sharpens Visual and Cognitive Integration

Following a moving object while planning your next move enhances visual tracking and decision-making. These integrated brain functions are vital not only in sports but in everyday activities like driving or managing multiple tasks at work.



## Ready to Get Moving? Try These High-Reflex Sports

### *Tennis, Table Tennis, Pickleball, Badminton*

Easy to pick up with minimal equipment, racket sports are excellent for beginners and advanced players alike. Check out your local community center or park district for lessons or leagues. Don't be intimidated; many communities have beginner nights or social meet-ups to help ease you in.

### *Basketball, Soccer, Volleyball*

Team sports offer both social and cognitive benefits. Join a recreational league or casual pickup game through apps, gyms, or community.

### *Martial Arts (Karate, Taekwondo, Judo)*

These disciplines blend physical agility with strategic thinking. Look for beginner-friendly classes at local dojos or fitness studios.

### *Boxing or Kickboxing*

These offer an intense cardio workout while honing reaction time and mental focus. Start with a trial class at a local gym — no sparring necessary to get the benefits.

### *Fencing*

This strategic, reflex-driven sport is often offered through specialty clubs. It's a cerebral workout disguised as a swordfight.

You don't have to be an elite athlete to reap the cognitive rewards of high-reflex sports. All it takes is a willingness to step out of your comfort zone and try something that challenges both body and mind. Whether you're aiming to stay sharp at work, manage stress, or support long-term brain health, picking up a fast-paced sport might be the most enjoyable way to do it.

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