

# Forest therapy walks for patients with chronic pain, Austria

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## Organisations involved

- Thermenhof/Special Institute for Rehabilitation (SKA) in Warmbad-Villach, Carinthia.
- Austrian Research Centre for Forests – Project Green Care FOREST /Forest Training Centre Ossiach, Carinthia.
- Self-employed forest educators.

## Aim

To offer patients forest therapy walks on a voluntary and weekly basis, which serve as a supplement to the patients' specific and individual therapy programmes. The forest therapy walks help patients in developing individual coping strategies for difficult life situations and are based on the idea that forests offer various health benefits to people. They are conducted in order to distract patients from their pain, help them to relax, improve their sleep quality and promote physical activity.

## Target group

Patients from the SKA suffer from chronic pain in their musculoskeletal system. The chronic pain is caused by illness, disability or is a consequence of recent medical operations. The participants stay at the SKA for around 3 weeks.

## What happens

The idea for the forest therapy walks was born after a young doctor of the SKA attended medical training in Germany. Afterwards she contacted the FAST Ossiach (Federal Research and Training Centre for Forests, Natural Hazards and Landscape Austria) to help her implement forest therapy walks at SKA. A pilot forest therapy walk for the medical team was conducted by the FAST Ossiach, which led to the decision to implement the forest therapy walks in a standard SKA therapy programme. Jointly a forest educator was identified who is able to offer this programme on a weekly basis. The forest therapy walks have been offered since 2015, with around 100 participants per year. They are conducted once a week, last for two hours and are limited to around 15 people. The setting is the nearby forest, which can be reached by foot in about 5 minutes from the SKA. It is up to the medical team to decide which patients are suitable for the forest therapy walks. This depends on the patients' musculoskeletal and cardiovascular constitution. Patients need to be able to walk an approximate distance of 1.5 km. The patients of the SKA are inpatients, so they can join the forest therapy walks theoretically 3 times during their stay. The forest therapy walks are included in the patients' treatment programme at the SKA (costs unknown). The walks are conducted by an experienced forest educator. The walk aims to distract people from their medical conditions; therefore the pain therapy itself is not discussed. The forest educator does not give any movement or exercise instructions; the forest itself, its animals and plants are the focus of the walks. The activity in the group in the natural surroundings of the forest has a soothing effect.

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## Results of the programme/project/intervention

Ongoing project with ongoing evaluation

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## Website

[www.med-warmbad.at/Thermenhof/EN/Home.html](http://www.med-warmbad.at/Thermenhof/EN/Home.html)

