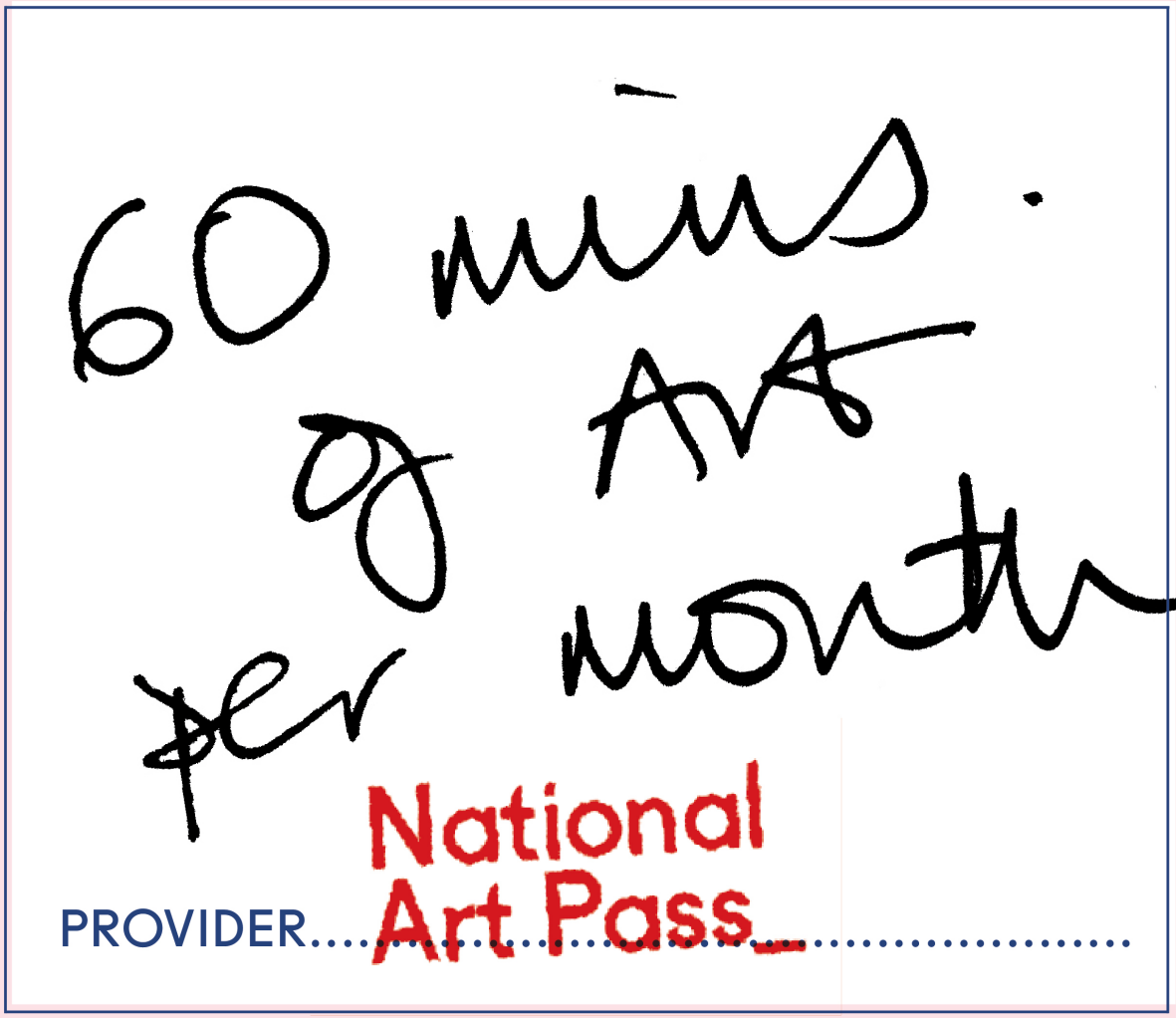
Art Fund_

In partnership with
Daisy Fancourt, PHD

THE RECOMMENDED DOSE OF ART

A PRESCRIPTION FOR HEALTH & WELLBEING:



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> “Engaging in the arts in our daily lives is not just a pleasure but an essential

Amidst busy lives, it can feel hard to find the time for anything. As a result, it's easy to deprioritise activities that feel like luxuries rather than essentials. However, as this new report highlights, arts engagement should not be viewed as a luxury. It is instead one of the most sophisticated activities that we as humans have evolved to participate in; one that deserves to be recognised both for the incredible beauty and meaning it brings to our lives as well as the diverse and deep-seated benefits it can confer on our health and wellbeing.

Indeed, over the past few decades, a rapidly growing body of evidence from psychology, neuroscience, biology, sociology and medicine has been accumulating, showing the arts bring benefits to our minds, brains, bodies and behaviours.

The problem is that the majority of us are not engaging sufficiently to experience all these myriad benefits. Figures showing that 45% of UK adults went to a museum in the past year may sound like a lot of people. But much like going for a run once a year is not going to drive meaningful health improvements, going to a museum once in 365 days does not allow us the opportunity to reap all the health and wellbeing benefits that cultural experiences provide.

So, I love the Recommended Dose of Art from Art Fund for us to spend one hour a month at a museum or gallery. Similar recommendations like eating our 5-a-day of fruit and veg or getting our 10,000 steps have been powerful nudges for us to prioritise other health-promoting behaviours in our busy lives. And charities such as Art Fund are helping to make this engagement accessible, with the National Art Pass providing hundreds of free and discounted opportunities.

This report is not about instrumentalising or reducing the arts to being a tool for health, but rather recognising and celebrating the added value they bring. Engaging in the arts in our daily lives is not just a pleasure but an essential, because the arts are an overlooked and fundamental pillar of our health and wellbeing.

Executive summary



The Royal Pavilion, Brighton & Hove Museums. Photo: © Will Hartley / Art Fund 2026

> The research impels us to view access to art not as a luxury but as an essential

In recent decades, scientists have published a huge number of studies into the relationship between art and wellness, creating a robust body of knowledge with the potential to benefit us all.

This report aims to unlock this potential, firstly by highlighting some of the most meaningful and potentially transformative findings, and secondly by presenting a new, evidence-backed guideline - a 'Recommended Dose of Art' - to help people reap the wellness benefits in their everyday lives.

A note on terms: while 'the arts' encompasses a wide range of arts engagement, this report will focus on how visiting museums and galleries ('cultural engagement') can improve our health, help to prevent illness and enable us to thrive and flourish.

Art is far more than a means to an end, of course. It's one of humanity's crowning achievements, and wellness benefits are just one reason that so many people enjoy visiting museums. The science specifically linking art and wellbeing is so compelling, however, that it deserves to be more widely understood.

The research impels us to view access to art not as a luxury but as an essential - one that should be available for everyone to benefit from and enjoy.



Introduction

Visitor at Brighton & Hove Museums. Photo: © Will Hartley / Art Fund 2026

Since homo sapiens started creating art around 40,000 years ago, humanity has been wondering if it's good for us.[1] We know experiencing art feels good for us, even if those feelings vary in the moment, from excited to confronted and everything in between. It's only in the last few decades that researchers have had enough data to test this intuition scientifically.

So, can art have tangible, meaningful effects on our health?

Over 30,000 empirical studies are now on hand to answer this question, many of which have been catalogued and summarised by Daisy Fancourt, Professor of Psychobiology and Epidemiology, in her book Art Cure: The Science of How the Arts Transform Our Health.[2] This report will explore some of the most impressive findings, across the impact of art on our emotional, mental, cognitive and physical wellness, the loneliness epidemic, and our ability to lead longer, fuller lives.

This exploration will lead us to a new 'Recommended Dose of Art' or RDA - how much and how often we need to be consuming art in order to feel these wellness benefits - alongside practical tips for making time to visit museums and galleries on a regular basis.

Because our health isn't just something that happens to us; it's also shaped by our decisions and behaviours. Happily, experts agree that a shift in our cultural engagement doesn't have to be drastic to drive results. The RDA has been designed for everyone to find feasible and enjoyable.

In summary, this report traces one of the most exciting developments in our understanding of human health, one with the potential to lead society towards a more holistic approach to helping people, and ourselves.

Key benefits

Over recent decades, science has deepened our understanding of how art is fundamentally and measurably good for us. In the following chapters, we take a look at some of the most notable findings.



Visitors at Brighton & Hove Museums. Photo: © Will Hartley / Art Fund 2026

CHAPTER 1

Art and mental health

For decades, doctors and other caregivers have been offering 'arts on prescription' to help patients manage the symptoms of mental illness. Trials show that people with diagnosed mental illnesses experience measurable reductions in symptoms of anxiety and depression when they're prescribed 12 weeks of arts activities - including going to museums, galleries and other cultural experiences.[3]

Even if we don't have a diagnosed condition, many of us feel anxious at times - perhaps not enough to seek clinical help, but enough to want a solution. Art can help here too: a recent study showed how viewing artworks in a gallery reduces stress hormones like cortisol - around a 22% greater reduction than the effect of viewing reproductions of the same artworks in a laboratory.[4] When we go to galleries or museums and practise slow viewing, we lower our heart rate, respiratory rate and blood pressure, and cause the vagus nerve to dampen adrenaline and ease tension around the body.

Museums and galleries are also places we can go for an energising boost of adrenaline, for example by exciting our senses, exposing ourselves to new ideas, and challenging our views of the world. This is important because we have two nervous systems - the sympathetic (sometimes known as 'fight or flight') and the parasympathetic ('rest and digest'). To respond dynamically and healthily to life experiences, we need a balance or 'swing' between the two.

> "People who regularly visit museums, galleries and other cultural events have nearly half the risk of developing depression over the next ten years, even when factors like wealth, physical health and social lives are removed from the equation

Over the past decade, studies have begun to suggest that arts experiences may also have preventative benefits. Studies of thousands of people have found that people who regularly visit museums, galleries and other cultural events have nearly half the risk of developing depression over the next ten years, even when factors like wealth, physical health and social lives are removed from the equation.[5]

These benefits stretch beyond the individual and into society. Based on current behaviour among older adults, this reduced rate of depression is estimated to save the NHS around £255 million every year, with broader productivity benefits of £3 billion.[6]

On top of all this, consuming art helps us regulate our emotions, reflect on our lives, clear our minds, stay in the present, and develop a stronger sense of self. The effects on our mental health may be short-lived at first, but they accumulate with regular visits.

CHAPTER 2

Art and brain health



Peter Randall-Page, Walking the Dog I, II & III, 2009. Photographed at Dulwich Picture Gallery's free Sculpture Garden. © Peter Randall-Page. Dulwich Picture Gallery, London. Photo: © Dan Burn-Forti / Art Fund 2026



Visitor at Brighton & Hove Museums. Photo: © Will Hartley / Art Fund 2026

When it comes to our grey matter, it really is a case of use it or lose it. The creativity and complexity involved in consuming art supports neuroplasticity - the ability of our brains to change and adapt. This reorganisation of the brain continues throughout our lives, leading scientists to recommend 'cognitive leisure activities' as well as physical exercise to keep us cognitively active for longer.

People who visit sites like galleries or museums have better preservation of their memory and executive function as they age, even when other variables like demographics, education, wealth, social class, employment, mental health, social networks and other leisure activities are taken into account. Moreover, the results are stronger the more people engage.[7]

In fact, the more regularly engaged people are with cultural activities like visiting museums or galleries, the longer the time they tend to have before symptoms of dementia manifest. Research tracking how many adults over the age of 50 go on to develop dementia over the following 12 years produced stark results. Those who are engaged in cultural activities like visiting museums and galleries every few months or more, have a 43% lower risk of developing dementia in that timeframe.

Again, this is even when other aspects of their backgrounds and lifestyles have been taken into account. Notably, the size of this protective association is similar to socialising once a week or more.[8]

Looking specifically at attendance at museums and galleries, researchers have found that for people who never visit, on average 7.3% develop dementia over the next decade. But for those that visit every few months or more, the rate is just 3.7%.[9] Again, this is after taking other aspects of people's lives and behaviours into account.



Visitors at Pitzhanger Manor & Gallery, Ealing. Photo: © Will Hartley / Art Fund 2025

> People who visit sites like galleries or museums have better preservation of their memory and executive function as they age

The science underpinning this research is ever growing. Stimulating environments improve synapse formation and help neurons grow and mature, increasing the brain's grey matter volume and enhancing connections between its regions. In effect, museum-goers appear to be topping up their 'cognitive reserve' - the brain's capacity to cope with change or damage - helping to compensate for longer against symptoms of cognitive decline and dementia.[10]

Of course, those already living with conditions like Alzheimer's can also benefit mentally from consuming art. Visiting cultural venues or engaging with museum objects can help to reduce stress and depression, which have biological consequences for the brain,[11] as well as enhance quality of life. For all of us, the more varied, direct and sustained our participation, the greater these cognitive benefits appear to be.[12]

CHAPTER 3

Art and healthy ageing

As we age, many of us become increasingly keen to maintain our physical health and fitness as much as we can, extending what scientists call our 'healthspan' - the time we're functionally fit and free from illness.

Cultural engagement can support this by helping to motivate us to stay physically active. If you want to maintain a better gait speed and sense of balance as you age, and avoid age-related disabilities that may affect your independence, studies show that incorporating regular attendance at cultural events into a healthy lifestyle brings multiple physical benefits.

Scientists have found that older adults who regularly go to museums and galleries tend to develop frailty at a later age, and have a slower trajectory of frailty when symptoms do start to appear. **By the age of 80, adults who are never engaged in the arts are 1.3 times more likely to be frail,** and these results are over and above the effects of being physically and socially active in other ways.[13]

Some of the benefits of cultural engagement for physiological processes like stress also appear to have cumulative benefits in relation to disease risk. A Swedish study found a lowered risk of coronary heart disease of around 34% in culturally engaged older adults.[14] In China, scientists found this group had a 35% lower risk of developing type 2 diabetes[15] (even after accounting for other variables at play) and similar findings have been reported in multiple other countries.

An increasing number of studies suggest that regular cultural engagement may have consequences for biological ageing too. Looking at patterns of respiratory, musculoskeletal, circulatory and immune biomarkers, over-50s who regularly visit cultural sites like museums and galleries are physiologically around four years younger than those who never engage, and have younger patterns of physiological age four and eight years later.[16] Individuals with the most frequent and diverse patterns of arts, cultural and heritage engagement also show patterns of gene expression that indicate a younger biological age.[17]

In fact, drawing on evolutionary theories about the benefits of the arts, more than a dozen studies have linked arts and cultural engagement with longevity, including a 2019 study that found culturally-engaged participants had a 31% lower risk of dying at any point over the next 14 years (notwithstanding other variables like wealth, health, demographics and disabilities).[18]

Essentially, the evidence shows that being both physically and artistically active is the best combination for healthy ageing. Incorporated into our lives in this way, art doesn't just help us survive - it helps us thrive.



Visitor at Pitzhanger Manor & Gallery, Ealing.
Photo: © Will Hartley / Art Fund 2025



Paulo Nimer Pjota, Encantados, 2026. South London Gallery, Main Gallery. Artwork courtesy Paulo Nimer Pjota. Photo: © Dan Burn-Forti / Art Fund 2026

> Over-50s who regularly visit cultural sites like museums and galleries are physiologically around four years younger than those who never engage



CHAPTER 4

Art and wellbeing

Visitor at the Natural History Museum, London. Photo: © Holly Pickering / Art Fund 2023

What happens when you admire a great painting, see a fascinating object up close, or wander through a sculpture garden?

Our brains respond to arts experiences by activating reward networks that lead to the release of neurotransmitters like dopamine, giving us feelings of pleasure.[19] When we view artwork in environments like galleries or museums, the aesthetics of the space itself can help us to enter a state of flow, when the regions of our brains involved in attention and reward synchronise. This can enhance the pleasure we experience, and even give us moments of awe or euphoria.

The human brain is wired to enjoy this kind of stimulation. But art delivers more than enjoyment: it answers several important human needs.

Beyond the basics of food, water, sleep, shelter, even things like financial security and freedom from oppression, to feel truly fulfilled in our lives, we must also nurture a sense of control, mastery, coherence and purpose. Participatory arts experiences like pottery or dancing provide opportunities for control and mastery, while arts venues like museums and galleries are great places to meet our needs for coherence and purpose, helping us to find meaning in our lives.

The sense of fulfilment we get from art gives our personal wellbeing a measurable boost. One study estimated that visiting museums provides wellbeing benefits equivalent to a £3288 pay rise, compared to that of participating in sports, at just £1538.[20] And this kind of flourishing in our everyday lives has the bonus effect of making us more resilient - physically and mentally - to difficulties that may come our way.[21]

CHAPTER 5

Art and loneliness

Visitors at Brighton Museum and Art Gallery. Artworks: © Courtesy of Alan Waltham; Courtesy of the Procter Estate / Bridgeman Images. Photo © Will Hartley / Art Fund 2026



Last but not least, cultural activities like visiting museums and galleries enhance our wellness by combatting loneliness - 82% of people claim the arts make them feel socially connected.[22]

It's well known that loneliness is a growing problem in the UK, especially among older adults. Age UK reports nearly a million over-65s are affected, with many going entire weeks without speaking to anyone. Human beings are wired for connection. Social bonding is essential for our physical health, mental wellbeing and overall survival, lowering stress and providing emotional support. Conversely, a lack of social connection is linked to a variety of health risks.

Socially-speaking, consuming art has an important role to play. Whether we're visiting an exhibition with a friend, joining a museum tour, or going solo and simply soaking up the atmosphere, cultural venues offer us a range of opportunities for what scientists call social bonding. Older adults who go to museums, galleries or concerts have 32% lower odds of reporting loneliness ten years later, compared to those who aren't so culturally active.[23] This makes sense: psychologically, we're wired to keep doing things that make us feel happy and connected.

In over 30 countries across the world, the 'social prescribing' of activities like the arts is increasingly being trialled for those considered at risk of future illness, including people who are lonely. Early indications suggest this reduces pressure on health services and brings a social return on investment of up to £8.56 for every £1 invested.[24]



left: The Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, shortlisted for the Museum of the Year award, 2026. Photo: © David Levene / Art Fund 2026



How to get more art in your life

Visitor at Pitzhanger Manor & Gallery, Ealing. Photo: © Will Hartley / Art Fund 2025

Despite these myriad wellness effects, currently only 11% of us are managing to consume enough art to really feel the benefit.[25] So how can we squeeze time for cultural engagement into our hectic modern lives? Here are some top tips:

1

KNOW YOUR RDA

When making lifestyle changes, it helps to have a rule of thumb. Something to aim for – like five fruit or veg a day or 10,000 daily steps. Accordingly, we have reviewed the evidence to establish a new 'Recommended Dose of Art', or RDA, backed by Professor Daisy Fancourt: *To reap the benefits of cultural engagement, we should aim to visit a museum or gallery for at least one hour every month.*

2

LOWER THE BARRIERS

With free and half price entry to hundreds of museums and galleries across the UK, the National Art Pass is a handy, accessible way to up the frequency of your cultural engagement - whether you're exploring on your own or using the experience to connect with others.

3

FOLLOW YOUR INSTINCTS

To maximise your happiness, head to a venue for the kind of art you feel most drawn towards. A government-funded review found that 55% of us live within walking distance of at least one museum, so you can support your local museum while enhancing your wellness.[26]

4

GIVE IT TIME

It's all too easy to emerge from a museum or gallery having seen a lot, but absorbed very little. To really feel the benefits, make sure you give yourself enough time to savour what's there. Put your phone away and focus on one thing for a few minutes - not seconds.

5

SWITCH IT UP

It's not just about frequency. The more varied your cultural engagement, the more likely you are to meet diverse psychological needs. So try visiting somewhere new from time to time - there's a wealth of places and activities to explore.

6

TAKE A RISK

When deciding what shape your engagement with art should take, don't be afraid to stretch into a bit of discomfort. It's easy to stick to what we know and like, but experiences that nudge us out of our comfort zones are good for us too.

7

MAKE IT A HABIT

If you can't commit to the RDA each month, don't despair - quick or irregular doses will still have a positive impact. But to experience long term benefits, especially when it comes to ageing as healthily as possible, aim to make cultural activities a regular part of your life.

8

JUST START

Even if you're someone who hasn't regularly consumed art for years, or ever, it's never too late to begin. Once you do, you're more likely to keep going, kick-starting a virtuous cycle that will quickly unlock more and more benefits for your health and wellbeing.

Launch event for Kids Aloud at the Foundling Museum, London. Photo: © Art Fund 2026



Conclusion

The studies cited in this paper are not proposing art as a replacement for medical treatment or professional healthcare. What they point to is a powerful and largely untapped resource for enhancing our wellbeing and our wellness. Art as the extra pillar of health.

Activities like visiting museums and galleries have multiple, quantifiable, interrelated benefits. They keep us socially connected, emotionally regulated, cognitively fit, physically active, functioning and flourishing for a longer period of time. And the more regular and sustained this activity, the better the results.

Given the data is now so convincing, we believe it's important to help people act. This is why we are advising a national 'Recommended Dose of Art', or RDA: to visit a museum or gallery for at least one hour every month.

If you can upgrade this to a weekly commitment, studies suggest you can expect to see a tangible improvement in your wellbeing even more quickly - within around six weeks.[27]

As with all health-related recommendations, the RDA is an approximate guide. To tailor your art consumption towards specific benefits, or unmet needs in your life, Daisy Fancourt's book Art Cure is an excellent starting point for what she calls "writing your own arts prescription".

"From a wellness perspective, therefore, the advice is to try and consume art IRL (in real life) where you can

It should also be noted that there's a measurable difference between engagement with an artwork in real life, and engagement with a reproduction. A physical space like a museum or gallery presents a cultural experience alongside extra, beneficial ingredients - encouraging you to explore a new space and interact with other people. While we can source and look at artworks from our own homes on a computer screen, viewing art in a gallery triggers distinct physiological responses that scientists did not detect in a control group viewing high-quality reproductions in a laboratory.[28] From a wellness perspective, therefore, the advice is to try and consume art IRL (in real life) where you can.

We're lucky in the UK - free entry is standard practice for all national and many local museums. Even so, the financially prosperous are currently twice as likely to visit museums every year than the financially stretched.[29]

The National Art Pass helps make art more accessible by offering free or half price entry to hundreds of museums, galleries and historic houses across the UK. Membership helps fund these venues, keeping their doors open and their collections world-class. As a tool for behaviour change, this kind of membership also helps to drive up the frequency and variety of cultural visits, unlocking more wellness benefits. From cutting-edge technology to regal history,

Visitor at Pitzhanger Manor & Gallery, Ealing. Photo: © Will Hartley / Art Fund 2025





Brighton Museum & Art Gallery, Brighton & Hove Museums. © 2026 Sokari Douglas Camp. All rights reserved, DACS. Photo: © Will Hartley / Art Fund 2026



Visitors viewing the Naples Collection gallery at Compton Verney, Warwickshire. Photo: © Zeinab Batchelor / Art Fund 2024

blockbuster exhibitions to local hidden gems, the experiences on offer are as diverse as you could imagine.

Admittedly, the arts cannot and should not be reduced to a simple list of beneficial ingredients, just as museums and galleries are much more than physical containers for art. These spaces can offer oases of peace and tranquillity. A place to visit alone or with others, allowing us to strengthen our relationships and spend time with loved ones in a different environment. Exhibits give us new topics of conversation, help us learn new things, and give us moments of calm to reflect.

We live in a time when a lot of health and wellness advice relates to cutting down or stopping certain behaviours - things like smoking, drinking, eating too much sugar or ultra processed food. If nothing else, the new 'Recommended Dose of Art' is a refreshing invitation to start something. A simple, joyful investment in your own wellbeing.

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The National Art Pass offers free or discounted entry to hundreds of museums, galleries and historic houses across the UK, as well as 50% off major exhibitions. National Art Pass members support the work of Art Fund, the national charity for museums and galleries, in championing and supporting museums across the UK.

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