



The Ultimate Guide on How to Train for Hiking

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Trails and Trips

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Gearing up for a hike but not sure if you're capable of the challenge ahead? In order to handle practically any hike, even a short one with just a few ascents and descents,

your body has to be able to handle the climbs, the miles and the weight you carry on your back.

Hiking, even on easy trails, is more than simply taking a stroll through the woods – it requires balance, endurance, and strength. Trails are uneven and usually have some amount of elevation gain, so hiking isn't necessarily something you can do after being sedentary for an extended period of time.

Before you head out, you should be in good physical shape, which requires the right type of regular training. For the most part, a person with an average level of fitness should be able to handle a moderate day hike, but it can still be challenging. The more active a lifestyle you live, the easier a time you'll have handling a few hours of physical exercise.

In this article, we're going to start by giving you an overview of hiking training, then we'll get into specifics and workout routines for particular types of hiking.

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Know What Type of Hiking You'll Be Doing



The type of hiking you'll be doing will determine what sort of training you need. Are you going on a strenuous day hike? Are you spending a night or several in the backcountry? Are you doing a long distance hike that will take several weeks or even months?

Moreover, what type of terrain and weather can you expect, and how much weight will you be carrying with you? It's helpful to look at trail maps, read forum discussions about where you'll be hiking, and check the weather expectations for the time of year you'll be out there.

Getting Started

It's easy to get injured when out on a trail, even if you're on a trail intended for beginners. Ankle sprains and rolled ankles are two very common hiking injuries. Your

first step to preventing these is being in decent physical shape. In this section, we're going to cover some of the basics of hiking conditioning.

Create a Walking Habit

If you don't currently walk a lot start by adding walking to your daily routine. This will get your body used to walk regularly. After a few weeks, you'll be ready to take on your first-day hike.

We realize that most people can walk and that you probably do some amount of walking day-to-day, but many people aren't used to walking for fitness, which means walking for a longer duration of time and covering a longer distance than you do in your daily life.



Here are a few more tips for creating a walking habit to prepare for hiking:

- Aim to go on a fitness walk a minimum of 2-3 times per week.
- Move fast enough to get your heart rate up, then keep it at that level for a minimum of 30 minutes.
- Wear the same shoes you'll be wearing during your hike, even if you're only walking on a paved trail for now.

Hit the Trail

Once you're comfortable with long walks near home or at a local park, you can start tackling short, easy hikes in your area. Then, as you get used to those, start picking trails that mimic the more advanced trails you want to do in the near future. Over time, you should increase the length of the hike and the elevation gain.

Use Trekking Poles

If you're worried about your ankles or knees, or if you want help keeping your balance on troublesome surfaces like ice or mud, bring along trekking poles.

I didn't use trekking poles for a long time because I assumed they were for amateur hikers, but they've saved me both on mild-but-muddy hikes and during one particularly difficult hike on one of the most intense Adirondack high peaks. Poles can help you stay balanced, but they also act as extra limbs, keeping you vertical as you navigate a trail or bridging a gap when you're on a steep part of the mountain.

They've also proven useful when I start running out of steam on a hike and need some extra support to find my footing. If you're going to use trekking poles, though, they take

some getting used to. Here's how to handle them:



- Use the straps so you don't get separated from the poles.
- Grip the top of the poles loosely. You don't want to put all of your weight on the poles if you can help it.
- Your arms will stay in a neutral position with just a little bend at the elbows.
- Play around with the length. For the most part, the poles can stay the same length, but if you have a section that's especially steep, you'll want them shorter for uphill and longer for downhill.
- Technically, you're not supposed to put the pole in front of your lead foot, but I've found it's best to just naturally get into a rhythm, which may even change as you hike.

- As you go uphill, place the poles wherever they're most useful. As you go downhill, the poles should be out in front of you a little bit.
- Your poles will probably come with different, interchangeable feet. Here's a helpful overview of the different feet and what they're best for. I've had luck with the spiky feet on ice and steep rock, while the regular feet are useful for regular conditions and terrain, as well as mud. Play around with them to determine what works for you.

Carry a Pack



You should also start carrying a backpack at some point, either when you first start hiking easy trails or as you get more in shape and can handle more challenging trails. Note that carrying a backpack with emergency basics is a good idea even if you're going on a short jaunt on an easy trail.

Eventually, you should carry the same size backpack you plan to take on your hiking trip and fill it with all of the gear you're going to carry. This will get you used to carry the weight you'll be carrying during the trip.

Consider Joining a Gym

It's a good idea to join your local gym. While the best training will come from being outside and on a trail itself, the gym will give you the opportunity to do more specific strength training and to keep up with your cardio workouts even during bad weather.

It also means you can stay in good shape and maintain your fitness level during the off-season. A bit later on we'll give you more tips to staying active during the winter.

Live an Active Lifestyle

Staying in shape isn't easy – you can quickly lose your fitness level if you don't continue to live an active lifestyle. It's helpful to add exercise to your daily routine, whether or not you're able to fit a workout or hike on that day. For example, opt for the stairs instead of the elevator, walk instead of driving, and always carry a small backpack with you to keep your body used to carry extra weight.



Mental Training

While we're going to be talking mostly about physical training in this article, mental training is a big part of hiking, too. You can be in excellent physical shape but still struggle mentally when you're out on the trail, particularly on long, solo hikes.

Preparing for adversity is a big part of being mentally prepared. It's important to know what to expect and also how to handle challenges in the moment. Research ahead of your trip to make a plan for the unexpected, like extra-cold weather, a surprise thunderstorm, blisters, and broken gear.

Personally, as a New York State hiker, I'm always nervous about encountering a black bear when I'm out on the trail, but the more I read about how to handle an encounter, the less nervous I am during my hikes – and the less nervous I am, the more in control I feel.

Exercises and Workout Routines

In this section, we're going to first talk about the best general exercises for hikers, then dive into more advanced strategies for preparing for intense hikes, long distance thru-hikes, and high altitude hiking.



Best Exercises for Hikers

There are a number of exercises, both cardio and strength training, that are good for hikers. Here are just some of them.

- There are all sorts of cardio exercises, but whichever one you choose, the goal is to raise your heart rate, which will improve your lung capacity and allow you to hike for longer.
- Running or walking in the sand will build up the leg muscles that protect your ankles and knees.

- Stand on a balance board to help build up the stabilizer muscles around your ankles and knees.
- Crunches will improve your core strength, which will help keep you balanced even on uneven surfaces.
- Lunges and squats are good for improving core strength, too, and you can hold hand weights as your fitness improves.
- Push-ups will help improve your upper body strength, particularly in your back, which will be helpful when you start carrying a heavy pack on your hikes.
- Step-ups are especially helpful before a long backpacking trip. Do them with a weighted pack – start with 20 pounds and increase the weight by 5 pounds every week until it's up to the weight you'll be taking. Step up onto a bench or other type of surface that's 16-18 inches high. Do step-ups 3 times per week until you can do 700 in under half an hour.
- Use a resistance band to strengthen your muscles and increase your range of motion.
- One workout you can do with a resistance band is a Band Walk. Put the band around your legs and position it right above your knees – you want there to be tension when you stand with your legs hip-width apart. Stand straight up, pull in your abs, place your hands on your hips, and walk sideways while keeping the band tense.



Another useful exercise is the Poor Man's, Leg Curl. Here's how to do it:

- Lay flat on the floor in front of an elevated bench.
- Place your left foot up on the bench.
- Lift your right leg as high as you can.
- Press your left foot into the bench, clenching your hamstrings and glutes as you do, and raise your hips so they leave the ground.
- Do 10 reps, then switch sides and repeat.

Basic Workout Routine

Cardio training is a big part of preparing for your hikes and it's what will keep your endurance high in order to handle challenges. Also, the more cardio you do, the better your body will be able to recuperate between workouts.

While you don't necessarily need a workout routine if you're just going to be doing simple day hikes, you still may want to improve your fitness level and hiking abilities. If you're the type of person who does better when they have a routine to follow, here's a good one to get you started:

- 2 days of resistance training, which includes lunges, planks, sit-ups, and pushups.
- Cardio training 3-4 days per week. Aim for 2 days of cardio training for every day of strength training.
- 1 day of rest per week. This is necessary for mental and physical recovery.

Note that cardio training doesn't have to be walking or hiking – it can also be cycling, jogging or swimming, or even attending one of your gym's fitness classes. While cardio is the most important type of exercise to prepare for hiking, resistance training is also important because it helps your body deal with prolonged stress.

When working out, you want to push yourself to feel fatigued, but not exhausted. When you're new to working out, start with a light exercise that increases your heart rate (it's helpful to wear a heart monitor). Then, as you become more fit, you can increase the length and intensity of your workouts.

Training for More Advanced Hikes



Overnight and long distance hikes require more intense training than day hikes. While you can get away with some basic fitness when preparing for a day hike, these more advanced hikes require a workout routine to prepare for. One of the biggest things to prepare for is multi-day hiking – you don't want to wake up on day 3 of a week-long hike and find out you're too sore to continue. While you need at least a month to prepare, a 9-week training schedule is even better. Start as early in the season as possible and follow this routine:

- Weeks 1-3: Strength train 3 days per week for 1 hour per session. Only rest for 1-2 minutes between sets.
- Weeks 4-6: Add 1 endurance workout per week (ex. hiking or running). Aim for 45 minutes at moderate intensity.

- Weeks 7-9: Increase your endurance workout to 1.5-2 hours. Add 1 day of high-intensity exercise that has high output and limited weight (ex. speed hiking with a light pack).

Note that this routine can be in addition to the walking habit you created as you were just getting started.

Training for a Thru-Hike

When it comes to training for a long distance thru-hike, you'll want to follow the same general techniques for getting started but carry it out for 6 months. Also, the first few days or weeks of your long distance hike will serve as some of your training.

Here's a quick overview of how to prep for a long thru-hike:

- Hike often and also engage in other types of aerobic exercise, like cycling, fitness classes, running or swimming. Start with 3 days per week and work up to 6 days per week.
- Start by hiking on flat terrain, then graduate to terrain with more elevation. Also, wear an empty pack, then gradually add weight until it reaches the weight you'll be carrying during your thru-hike.
- Gradually increase your level of exertion so that you're always feeling fatigued without feeling exhausted.
- Work in up to 3 days of resistance training per week, which should include lunges, planks, and squats.
- Always allow for one full day of rest to completely recover, regardless of how much your fitness level improves.



Mental preparation is highly important when you're going to be out on the trail for weeks or months on end. As you head out on more challenging or longer hikes during your training, strive to always take everything in stride and to have a resilient attitude no matter what happens. Instead of worrying about the hike as a whole, think only of your next few steps – this is one of the best ways to overcome doubt, fear or tiredness.

Training for High Altitude Hiking

High altitude hiking and mountaineering put more strain on the body because there are steep ascents and more pressure on your lungs, both of which require even more strength than other types of hiking. In order to properly acclimate to the high elevation, you'll want to gain height gradually over several days. Other ways to keep altitude sickness at bay include avoiding alcohol, staying hydrated, eating enough food and going at an even, slow pace.

Preparing for altitude hiking has a lot to do with safety, too, so that you can safely finish your trip without any major complications. You need to be fit enough to get down and

away from the situation should the weather become dire.

While training for high altitude hiking shares a lot of the same techniques as training for regular backpacking, you should give yourself a minimum of 6 months to prepare for your trip. Here's a sample training program to get your body in shape for a high altitude trip:

- Months 1-2: Get in shape using cardio exercises and strength training. The muscles you should focus on are the back, calves, and thighs. During the week, alternate between outdoor cardio workouts and indoor strength training.
- Months 3-4: Push your cardio workouts by doing them for longer, going farther, going faster, etc. Add weights during strength training. Your goals during this phase are to improve your lung capacity and your strength.
- Months 5-6: You can pull back on the weight training during these last 2 months. Keep up your cardio workouts. The goal here is to maintain your fitness level while saving some of your energy for your trip.

Here are some of the specific exercises that will be most useful when training for high altitude hiking:

- Abdominal exercises
- Assisted Dips
- Bosu ball stability exercises
- Calf raises
- Chin-ups
- Lat pull-downs
- Low back extensions using a fitness fall

- Lunges
- Step-ups
- Squats
- Staircase or step machines at the gym



Preventing Altitude Sickness

If you're going on a hike that is over 8,000 feet, it's necessary to know how to recognize the signs of altitude sickness and how to treat it. Air pressure is reduced the farther up you go, meaning you have less oxygen to breathe, which makes your body less efficient.

Signs of altitude sickness include headaches, insomnia, loss of appetite, nausea, and trouble sleeping. These symptoms should pass in a day or two, but if they don't, the best cure for altitude sickness is to go back down to a lower elevation. More serious signs of altitude sickness include dizziness, vomiting, blue lips or nails, confusion, and feeling like you're not able to walk.

Staying Active in the Off-Season

Wintertime hiking is a whole other animal from regular hiking during the spring, summer, and fall. Even if you're not engaging in high altitude hiking during the winter, the snow, ice, and low temperature can pose their own hazards and challenges. Personally, I've found that even if I can get through a wintertime hike, it doesn't result in as many fitness benefits as the rest of the year because I'm not moving as fast. For that reason, you may want other ways to stay active during the off-season, whether that means engaging in other outdoor sports or spending most of your exercise time indoors.

Here are three options for keeping your fitness level high even when the weather isn't conducive to your regular hikes:

1. Spending time on an indoor rock climbing wall will improve both your hiking technique and your stamina. Indoor rock climbing requires a ton of coordination, balance, and strength. If you've never done it before, take a guided class to learn the basics.
2. Skiing can help you improve your endurance even when you're not able to hike. You don't have to ski too often, but aiming for one ski trip per week is a good start.
3. Snowshoeing is a relatively affordable hobby to pick up, and it's great for a cardio workout. Also, while it may seem clumsy at first, it's fairly easy to get used to, and it's a more convenient alternative to hiking in snow. Replace your regular hiking with snowshoeing a few times a week.



Whatever type of workouts you choose during the winter, it's an excellent opportunity to add variety to your training routine. It's also the perfect time to improve an area you're lacking in, whether that's the balance, lung capacity or strength.

What Happens if You Don't Train for Hiking?

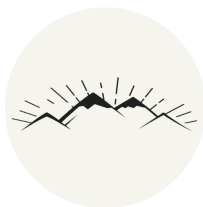
Hiking can be difficult on the body, particularly downhill hiking, which puts a lot of stress on your knees and toes. As you go down a decent, your body naturally tries to hold its weight back, which is added to by whatever weight you're carrying on your back.

While this keeps you from falling, it also puts a lot of pressure on your body. Going uphill may feel challenging, but downhill can actually be harsher on the body. Scrambling over rocks and walking on uneven surfaces strains the joints, too. Hiking

before you're physically fit can lead to discomfort or injury, and it can leave you winded quickly, without the strength to finish the hike or to at least finish it with strength and confidence. The best way to prevent any of these issues is to get your body in shape for the challenge ahead.

Further read:

- [15 Best Dog Breeds for Off-Leash Hiking](#)
- [The Best Hiking Trails in Phoenix](#)
- [The Best Hiking Trails in Austin](#)



All Outdoors Guide Team

The All-Outdoors Guide team is comprised of enthusiastic experts that enjoy helping others that aspire to be better at outdoor fun. Part of that is making sure you have the right gear and information when it's time to go out and have fun. Some of our team have accomplished amazing feats like climbing 6000 feet to the top of mountains, others have explored every dirt trail they could find and we even have some people that have backpacked solo on various continents. No matter what our readers want to learn and do, our team is here to help them accomplish those goals.

By [All Outdoors Guide Team](#)

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