

LIFE

Walking outdoors with a weighted backpack builds strength, endurance and clears out the cobwebs

“Rucking” is a form of military training. People are discovering its mental-health benefits, too.

Feb. 22, 2022   



Sean Blinch, front left, leads a rucking group through Sherwood Park in midtown Toronto.

Giovanni Capriotti for the Toronto Star

By Shawna Cohen Special to the Star

Sweating profusely under layers of heavy winter clothing in minus 14 C weather is not something I knew was possible — unless you’re being chased by a dog or running for your life.

In my case, the culprit is a backpack loaded with 13 kilograms. I’m in Toronto’s Sherwood Park, where an ambitious friend has dragged me for 90 minutes of rucking — a fancy way of saying walking with a weighted backpack.

The term rucking has its roots in military training — ruck is short for rucksack (a.k.a. backpack) — and it helps prepare soldiers to travel long distances while carrying essential gear. While the activity has been around for ages, rucking is becoming increasingly popular among civilians as a form of exercise, an alternative to running or even cycling in the warmer months. And with the current pandemic, many people are choosing the great outdoors over crowded gyms or expensive group fitness classes. One need only google “ruck” to find a slew of podcasts and social-media accounts dedicated to the activity.

Turns out rucking is no joke. According to researchers at the [University of South Carolina](#), rucking can burn somewhere between two and three times the calories of walking and delivers cardio benefits equal to jogging. It's easy to see why. Navigating nearly eight kilometres of icy paths, I can feel the burn, huffing and puffing my way up some seriously challenging hills. With the added weight, it's as if I'm carrying a case of Pinot Grigio on my back (I should be so lucky).

Flashbacks of overnight canoe trips come to mind. Suddenly I'm 15 again, lugging canoes and gear-filled backpacks from one body of water to another during the dreaded portage. And on this crisp winter day, I'm in awe of the natural beauty surrounding me here in midtown Toronto: 150-year-old trees coated in fresh snow; ducks sleeping peacefully in a half-frozen stream.

Like most people living through a global pandemic, I've been in a serious mental rut thanks to rolling lockdowns and the overall stress of COVID-19. Today, I'm feeling hopeful and clear-headed, which is precisely the point. "The number one health benefit from rucking is that it's an antidepressant. The world is heavier and darker than ever, yet this is one of the easiest, most accessible things you can do for your mind," said Sean Blinch, co-owner of RedLeaf Fitness.

In other words, time spent outdoors with friends, breathing in fresh air, is a major mood enhancer. Scientists have been saying this for years: one study out of the U.K. found that group walks in nature were associated with significantly less depression and perceived stress, and greater mental well-being.

During Toronto's recent lockdown, Blinch was searching for a community activity that would get people outdoors and active. He created RedLeaf Ruck Club, where people of all fitness levels are invited to gather weekly for a group hike. All that's required is a backpack loaded with anything from sandbags to stones to actual dumbbells or plates (soup cans work well, too); experts suggest starting with 10 to 15 per cent of your body weight and moving up gradually from there.

For the ruck-curious who worry about back issues, studies show that rucking can actually be used as a form of physical therapy. Stuart McGill, CEO of BackFit Pro and professor emeritus of spine biomechanics at University of Waterloo, says that walking with a loaded backpack brings the centre of mass over the hips and "unloads" the back, reducing muscular backache caused by sitting. In an episode of the "Glorious Professionals" podcast, McGill told host Jason McCarthy about the health benefits of walking to correct back pain; the best progression for back rehab, he said, is to throw on a backpack and ruck.

McCarthy is a former Army Special Forces sergeant. He and wife Emily McCarthy co-founded GORUCK, a multimillion-dollar company that builds rucking gear and hosts a series of fitness challenges led by current or former Special Forces members, of which rucking is a major component (in Toronto, the "GORUCK Canada Day Tough" takes place July 1). They have helped popularize the sport, attracting people like Toronto's Dustin Chang, who plans to participate again in this year's Canada Day event.

Chang, 39, has been rucking since his teenage years, when he joined the Canadian Army Reserve. These days, he's all about building community through the sport. In 2018, he launched Ruck T.O. Ruck Club, which focuses on themed events, including a nighttime Halloween ruck that ends at a local pub, as well as a Santa ruck/toy drive that has members meet near St. Lawrence Market and ruck over to Sick Kids Hospital to drop off toys.

Since COVID-19 hit, his entire family has been exploring new areas of the city together on a weekly ruck. His children, ages six and eight, load their backpacks with stuffed animals and water. "It's so scalable; you can add or decrease weight and pick your distance. There's no pressure to go fast," said Chang. "There aren't a lot of barriers to get started.

"All you need is a pair of shoes and a backpack."

Shawna Cohen has been writing about fashion, travel, design, health, parenting and lifestyle trends for more than two decades. Follow her on Instagram @co.snaps

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