

Hike for Your Health

Do you feel that your walking routine is getting boring? Are you looking for something a little more adventurous and exciting? Hiking might be just the thing for you. Hiking can provide all the health benefits of a walk in the neighborhood or on the treadmill with some added bonuses. The great outdoors can offer a feeling of peace, stress relief, and adventure that your daily walk might not always provide.

Why Hiking?

Hiking is an aerobic activity, just like walking. This means that it can improve your overall health, specifically your heart health because your heart rate and breathing are elevated during the activity. In some cases, hiking where there are hills or rough terrain can be more intense than walking on level ground. This can mean a more vigorous workout and improved health, not to mention positive results if your goal is to lose or maintain weight.



Improve Your Mood

Regular physical activity can affect your mental health. It can improve mood, increase self-esteem, and aid in stress management. Hiking can offer a peaceful atmosphere that is sure to put you in a good mood and might even help to relieve your stress. There is nothing quite like a hike in the quiet of the wilderness. It allows you to escape from the hustle and bustle of everyday life and reflect on the beauty the great state of Kentucky has to offer. As you walk along you can watch wildlife, see beautiful scenery such as lakes and waterfalls, and identify plants or flowers that can't be seen in your own backyard.

Hike Right

Hiking can sometimes be a more intense physical activity than simply walking on level ground. It is important to see a doctor before beginning a hike or any physical activity program especially, if you are not active or if you have any type of health condition.

Just as with walking, it is important to start slowly and progress gradually. Begin with short daytime hikes. If you will be hiking in a state park, contact the staff at that park to find out information on the area and types of trails within the park. Follow these tips to make the experience right for you and your fitness level.

- Hike with others for safety.
- Keep a first aid kit, water, and snacks in a nearby car for short hikes and carry one with you for longer hikes.
- Choose a path that is shorter, has smooth terrain, and has no extreme inclines or hills.
- Gradually work yourself up to hikes with hills or uneven terrain.
- Once you have accomplished short daytime hikes, consider a long, weekend hike.
- Remember: if your hike requires you to carry a backpack, you will be increasing your weight by 10 to 15 pounds. This will require more energy, so try hiking with a pack for shorter distances to condition your self to the extra weight.

- Pay attention to your surroundings and stay alert for poisonous plants or dangerous wildlife.
- Take time to enjoy your surroundings.

To get the most from your physical activity, be sure to use correct walking form when you are hiking.

- Chin up, shoulders slightly back
- Toes pointed forward
- Heel touching the ground first, with weight rolling forward on the foot
- Swinging arms
- Stomach muscles (abdominals) tight



It is important to include a warm up and to cool down with your hike to allow your body to prepare for the physical activity and then to return it to a normal, resting state. Simply begin your hike at a slow pace on level ground. Once you have done this for about five minutes, your body should be ready for you to increase your pace and the intensity of your hike. About three to five minutes before your hike is over, slow your pace down so that your body can return to a resting state gradually.

Flexibility in joints and muscles can make it easier to do daily activities, such as bending over, sitting, reaching, and stepping. In hiking, flexibility is important because often there may be rocks or logs to step over and hills to walk up. Keeping your body flexible will make it easy to face these physical challenges during your hike. Be sure to stretch all muscle groups after your muscles are warm. This can be after you warm up or after you are finished with your hike.

Get out and experience the beauty of nature that Kentucky has to offer while being physically activity at the same time. Get moving and get hiking for better health!

Sources:

- Weight-control Information Network, **Walking: A Step in the Right Direction**, available online at <http://win.niddk.nih.gov/publications/walking.htm>
- MayoClinic.com, **Walking for fitness: How to trim your waistline, boost your spirits and improve your health**, available online at <http://www.mayoclinic.com/invoke.cfm?objectid=81159EEB-F5A4-47A4-9DEAA5FAA077F76D>
- Myers, C. **Walking: A Complete Guide to the Complete Exercise**, New York: Random House, Inc., 1992.
- American Hiking Society, **Step To It: A Beginners Guide to Hiking and Walking**, Fact Sheet, available online at <http://www.americanhiking.org/news/pdfs/step.pdf>
- American Hiking Society, **A Step in the Right Direction: The Health Benefits of Hiking and Trails**, Fact Sheet, available online at http://www.americanhiking.org/news/pdfs/health_ben.pdf

Prepared by:

Lori L. Rice, M.S., C.N.
 Extension Associate for Health
 UK Cooperative Extension HEEL Program
 August 2005

UK
 UNIVERSITY
 OF KENTUCKY
 Health Education
 through
 Extension Leadership

For information on health issues in Kentucky, log on to:
www.ca.uky.edu/heel

Educational programs of Kentucky Cooperative Extension serve all people regardless of race, color, age, sex, religion, disability, or national origin.