

Gear Up: Preparing for a Hike

Hiking can be a fun and exciting form of physical activity. As with most physical activities, there are a few things you will need to get started. Proper shoes and clothing will keep you comfortable and make the experience more enjoyable. The right kind of bag or pack will allow you to carry the supplies you might need along the way. The idea is to be prepared for most situations so you can enjoy yourself and all the benefits hiking can bring.

Shoes

A good quality pair of shoes is a must for all physical activity. If you are a beginner and plan to stay on mostly smooth, level paths, a pair of walking or running shoes will work. Keep these tips in mind when shopping or deciding what shoes to wear:

- Make sure the shoes fit properly and are comfortable.
- The soles should be sturdy and thick.
- The bottoms should have good traction to avoid slipping.



Once you become a little more advanced in your hiking and take on trails with hills, rocks, or rough terrain, it might be time to consider some hiking boots. As with tennis shoes, make sure they fit properly. Try them on both feet and walk around the store to be sure there are no places that rub and could cause blisters. Some hiking boots are waterproof and will prevent your feet from getting wet if you step in a puddle or get caught in the rain.

Clothing

It is best to dress in layers when you are headed outdoors for physical activity. This will enable you to remove layers if you begin to warm up and add them on if you cool down. Hiking in the spring and fall are good times to follow this practice. It might be warm when you come to an open area where the sun is shining, however, it might be several degrees cooler once you move into an area with thick shade. If the weather is expected to be hot, choose trails that stay in shaded areas, or try to stay near water sources. Take along some type of waterproof jacket that is easy to carry or that can be wrapped around your waist. It is always a good idea to prepare for an unexpected rain shower.

Your socks can be just as important to your feet as your shoes. When hiking, wear thick socks. You might even consider buying a pair made especially for hiking, which can usually be found at camping supply stores or sporting goods stores. These socks usually are not made of cotton, which means they can keep your feet drier. Be sure to pack an extra pair of socks, especially if your shoes are not waterproof. There can often be puddles along trails, especially after rain. A hike in wet socks can ruin a fun time.



Protect Yourself

In addition to your standard first aid items, you'll need to bring things along that will protect you from pesky bugs and the sun's damaging rays. Take an insect repellent to keep the bugs away and prevent bites. Choose a spray with DEET for adults. For kids, choose a spray that has been specially formulated for children. Avoid using scented shampoos, lotions, or perfumes before going on your hike. They can attract unwanted bugs.

Chances are you will spend some of your time in open areas, and even if you don't, the sun's rays can sometimes get to you in mostly shaded areas. Protect yourself by applying sunscreen with an SPF of 30. Choose a sport or sweatproof variety because you will be working hard during your hike and will probably work up a sweat. Apply the sunscreen often to your exposed skin. Don't forget about your ears, and use a lip balm with SPF to protect your lips. A hat and sunglasses can also help protect you.

Taking It All Along

Now that you know what you need to take with you on your hike, you need to have something to carry it all in. If you aren't hiking for an extended period of time or carrying a lot of equipment, a large backpack may not be necessary. If you are only taking a few items, consider using a waist pack. You can pack first aid supplies, bug spray, sunscreen, and extra socks in one, and have a fellow hiker carry the snacks. If you'll be taking along a few meals, consider a small backpack. Just keep comfort in mind. You don't want to be carrying too much weight during your hike. This might wear you out too quickly, especially if you are climbing hills.

Know Where You Are Going

It is important to know where you are going on your hike, especially if you are unfamiliar with the area. Take along a map if one is available to keep track of where you are and what will be around you. Get a compass and train yourself how to use it before you head out on your hike. If this is your first time for hiking, try to find someone to join your group that has some hiking experience or someone that at least knows the area well.

Sources:

- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, BAM! Body and Mind – **Fit4Life: Motion and Commotion: Hiking Activity Card** available online at http://www.bam.gov/fit4life/activity_cards/ac_hiking_pr.htm
- American Council on Exercise, Fit Facts, **Take Your Workout Off the Beaten Path** available online at http://www.acefitness.org/fitfacts/fitfacts_display.aspx?itemid=68

Prepared by:

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

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