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Ten Essential Hiking Tips for Women

While hiking may be putting one foot in front of the other, there are some tips that can make any hike more enjoyable. Here are our top ten hints.

1. Hike at your own pace

If you're like many other women, the first introduction you may have had to hiking is with an experienced companion who sets off at a fast pace that leaves you gasping for breath. Inevitably this leads you to decide that hiking isn't fun. Being forced to hike at a slower pace than you want can also be uncomfortable and often discourages people from going on group hikes. The most important hiking skill you can learn is to hike at your own pace, even in a group. How do you know what that pace is? Your pace is one that you can comfortably sustain without ever stopping to catch your breath, even when going up a steep hill. At the right pace, your body feels good, your breathing deep but still comfortable, your muscles working but not over-taxed. You may still need to stop for an occasional break, but at the right pace you should feel like you can go forever.

2. If you're a beginning hiker, start with beginner hikes

Because hiking is just a variation of walking, and we all walk all the time, you may assume that the only thing that determines what hike you do is how fit you are. Not true. Every time you hike, your neuromuscular system learns something about how to place your foot, how to keep your balance, and what adjustments the upcoming terrain will require. The more you hike, the more all of this becomes unconscious and automatic, just like driving a car. The biggest difference between an experienced and an inexperienced hiker is not how fast they hike, but how comfortable they feel going downhill or hiking on uneven ground.

3. Stay well hydrated

Sometimes women hesitate to drink as much water as they need to when hiking because elimination is more challenging for them than it is for men. This is a huge mistake. Not being adequately hydrated can lead to headaches, fatigue, and irritability, all of which can make you more accident-prone. An easily accessible water bottle is adequate, but a [hydration system](#) with a tube that enables you to sip water while hiking is even better. Not having to stop and put your pack down means that you are more likely to drink before you're thirsty, a key to staying well hydrated.

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4. Take care of "hot spots" as soon you feel them

Many times women who start feeling "hot spots" on their feet, those small areas of heat and discomfort, delay taking care of them because they don't want to slow the group down. This is an understandable but big mistake, as hot spots can become blisters in five minutes – and blisters are much more difficult to treat. The best treatment is to apply some tincture of Benzoin over the affected area. Benzoin protects the skin, dries it, and provides a sticky surface for tape. When tacky, cover the painted area with some moleskin, preferably with a circle cut out (making it look like a doughnut) and placed over the area.

5. Make sure your boots fit well

Many women have "low volume" feet meaning feet that are narrow and skinny with a very narrow forefoot and heel area, and a low instep. It makes getting boots that fit quite challenging, and ill-fitting boots lead to ankle injuries and blisters. The most important step is to buy your boots from a store that has salespeople who know how to fit them. If they simply bring out several pairs and ask you how they feel, walk out. Superfeet insoles both provide support and add volume, which can make a huge difference.

6. Don't wear cotton clothing

Except when hiking in a hot, dry climate, cotton clothing should be avoided- including cotton bras. Cotton absorbs sweat and thus stays saturated. Having wet and cold clothing next to the body can cause rapid chilling. Bras are particularly bad because they are designed to be skintight. Two solutions: don't wear one and have the first layer be a fabric that "wicks" sweat away; if you are uncomfortable going without a bra, another good choice is to buy one made of wicking material.

7. Put on a layer as soon as you take a break

It's not uncommon to be a little overheated when you stop for a break, and it's tempting to enjoy cooling off. This is fine as long as it is warm. But if your hiking has taken you up a hill to cooler temperatures and perhaps some wind, putting on a layer as soon as you stop is essential. Best is something with wind-blocking ability (Gore-Tex rain jackets are great for this). Otherwise, once your body temperature starts to drop, it keeps going- and pretty soon you're colder than you want to be. Wearing cotton, including a cotton bra, makes this even worse and increases the likelihood of getting dangerously chilled.

8. Take good care of your knees

It is an unfortunate fact that arthritis of the knees is associated with age, and that women are more likely to develop it than men. In addition, women are more likely to suffer knees injuries, particularly to their anterior cruciate ligament (ACL). The reasons for it are not completely known – hormones, musculature and skeletal structure all seem to play a role. Trekking poles are extremely helpful (see below). Other things you can do:

- *Before the trip:*
 - Build up your leg strength. Before your hiking trip, start doing squats and lunges with gradually increasing weight. Doing these exercises incorrectly can make your knees worse, so make sure that you get proper instruction. But strengthening the muscles that stabilize the knee joint can do wonders for preventing knee pain.
- *During the trip:*
 - Keep your legs loose. Some women have a tendency to walk stiff-legged, especially on a steep trail where they are anxious. The more you can consciously keep your legs a little flexed at the knee, the less pounding your knees get.
 - Turn sideways on high steps. This allows you to use the stronger muscles in your legs so that you step down more slowly and don't hit the ground with your foot as hard, thereby decreasing the pressure on your knee.
 - Walk slightly pigeon-toed. This loosens the ligaments on the inside of your knee, which helps decrease knee pain.

9. Learn how to use hiking/trekking poles

All the guides at Adventures in Good Company are huge fans of trekking poles: they are your best friend for preventing knee pain or for keeping it from getting worse. However, there are a number of tricks to using poles that will make them much more comfortable and efficient. We teach these tricks on our hiking trips but you can also learn them from a simple search or this YouTube [video](#).

10. Follow proper trail etiquette

Like everything in life, there are some all-too-often unspoken norms that dictate hiking etiquette. It's always easier to feel more comfortable in a new setting when you have a clear idea of the basic "rules." Walking on the right, giving uphill hikers the right-of-way, yielding to horses and bikers, and leaving no trace are easy ways to make sure you are respecting other hikers and the natural environment. Knowing trail etiquette before you hike will boost your confidence.