



Burn Crazy Calories...Hiking!

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You want to buff up? Hit the trails. On a hike you'll slim down and rediscover the fun in fitness.

Your ultimate workout isn't at the gym, in an air-conditioned studio or on the treadmill in your basement – it's waiting for you in the great outdoors. Few activities beat the body benefits of hiking; you're slipping cardio into your day and burning up to 530 calories per hour on the trail. And in gusty weather, the wind resistance can boost your burn potential by about 5 percent, experts say. It's a terrific total-body workout.

“When you hike, you hit your body from lots of different angles and engage muscle groups you may miss at the gym, like the back, outer thighs and deep core muscles,” says Steve Silberberg, founder of Fitpacking, an outfitter in Hull, Mass., that runs backpacking trips. The variety of challenges trails offer – logs to climb over, ditches to avoid – puts some on a par with the most grueling boot-camp workouts.

Exploring outdoor paths is also good for your brain. Research shows that just five minutes of exercise in a natural environment boosts your mood, which makes total sense: Lush scenery is more inspiring than a gym television permanently stuck on ESPN. A study from the University of Utah and the University of Kansas found that backpackers scored 50 percent better on a creativity test after spending four days in natural settings, disconnected from electronic devices. Away from our cell phones and tablet devices, our mind can relax, scientists say, freeing up our imagination. That means you might want to take a break from Words With Friends when you're on a hike – though certain apps can come in handy.

Anyone at any fitness level can join Mother Nature's gym. “If a person is capable of going up a flight of stairs, they can hike,” says Marc Alabanza, program director for The Ranch at Live Oak in Malibu, Calif. So break out that backpack and follow these simple strategies to increase your fitness – and pleasure – payoffs.

First, find a great trail

A slew of useful websites makes it easy to pinpoint a fun local hike, or even 10 of them. On the biggies – trails.com and localhikes.com, as well as with the online tool Nature Find (visit nwf.org, the National Wildlife Federation’s website) – you can search locations by zip code and read detailed information, including trail length, level of difficulty, scenery you’ll see along the way and hiker reviews. Or just stop by your local hiking or outdoor-activities shop – you never know, the one with the ever-cheery, Patagonia-clad folks behind the counter – and ask about the top trails in the areas. A word to beginners: **“You can always take an easy hike and make it more challenging,”** says exercise physiologist and hike leader Franci Cohem of Fuel Fitness in Brooklyn, N.Y. (think varying the intensity with speed bursts.) **“What you can’t do, though, is make a hard hike easier.”** In other words, **don’t try to tackle Machu Picchu the first time you go off-road.**

Next, get in good form

As with any sport, you want to protect your body from injury and get the best, most efficient workout. On flat stretches, says Cohen, “walk like you are proud – shoulders pulled back and relaxed, spine in line and leading with your chest, not your knees.” On downhill sections, reduce the length of your stride to make the slopes more manageable and increase traction. When you encounter a monster climb, do a light squat to balance better. **Just don’t walk around hunched over: You could strain your back and make your knees more prone to injury if you’re hyperflexing them,** cautions Cohen. **No matter how much fun you’re having as a trailblazer, take breaks whenever your body is so tired that your form starts to suffer. And keep downing water.**

Slow down, woman!

You don’t need to go superfast or tackle insane inclines to ramp up results. In fact, experts agree that if you’re new to this, you’re better off taking a trail with a few smaller hills and going at an easy pace – meaning you’re putting in about the same effort as you do during a slow jog. You should be able to talk comfortably and in complete sentences. This way, you can last and stay in your fat-burning zone. **“When you go at a slower pace for a longer amount of time, your body burns more fat than carbohydrates,”** says Cohen. **Over time, you’ll lose inches faster. And don’t blow through the downhill sections: They can require your body to work extra hard. As Silberberg explains, “When you take downhills slowly, you get into a plod-stop-plod-stop rhythm, so your muscles have to conspire to stop you. That makes the effort more challenging and a bigger calorie burner.”**

Seriously boost the burn

To increase the fitness benefits of a hike, Cohen recommends lunging up slight inclines, jumping on and off cut tree stumps, or grabbing a tree trunk, sinking into a squat and pulsing there for 60 seconds, then repeating the move several times. Adds Kristen Nolan, owner of I Luv My Body Fitness Boot Camp and Personal Training in San Francisco, “As you’re walking, you can press your arms overhead, then bring elbows down to your sides, like a shoulder press minus the dumbbells, repeating as you walk.” Doing these moves boosts the intensity of your workout, which in turn fires up your fat-melting furnace. “When you finish the exercise and continue along the trail, walking at a good pace, you’ll burn 20 to 25 percent more calories for the next 7 to 10 minutes,” Nolan says. What’s more, throwing in spurts of extra exercise can bump up your burn to a whopping 600 calories an hour. It’s yet another reason to head for the hills!