
TRAIL TIPS

Helpful Hints for Hiking

What's Afoot?



...it's that thing at the bottom of your leg...

My apologies to our President, Beth Smith, for hijacking the title of her bulletin column. However, as you will read, it's appropriate for this month's topic.

Welcome back to another season of hiking with the Sun City Hikers! We have a lot of great hikes to look forward to this year, and in the interest of ensuring we are all able to function at our peak abilities, this month we are going to cover taking care of our feet.

Yeah, I know, feet are not a really fun thing to discuss. But when you're on the trail, those appendages at the bottom of your legs become a very important part of having a fun day of hiking, or an excruciating death march across the burning sands. If you've ever developed a blister three miles from the trailhead, you know what I'm talking about. So let's start with some basic maintenance topics.

Plantar Fasciitis is just about the worst foot pain I have ever encountered. The root cause is the gradual shortening and tightening of your calf muscle which extends down and around your heel, and attaches to the bottom of your foot. As it shortens, it exerts tension on the arch, and feels like your foot is in an eternal foot cramp. What really helped me was periodic stretching of the calves. Here's some information I found on healthline.com.



Stretch your calves

1. Stand an arm's length from a wall.
2. Place your right foot behind your left.
3. Slowly and gently bend your left leg forward.
4. Keep your right knee straight and your right heel on the ground.
5. Hold the stretch for 15 to 30 seconds and release. Repeat three times.
6. Reverse the position of your legs, and repeat.

Now, a few tips to increase the effectiveness of these stretches. The best time for these stretches is after a bit of walking, when your muscles are loosened up a bit. I try to do it on my first water stop after beginning a hike. I use my hiking sticks instead of a wall to lean on. I actually have a timer on my watch to remind me to stretch those calves 4 or 5 times a day. I'll walk around a little to loosen up, then stretch. Do not bounce when stretching! You can overextend the calf muscle, and make things worse. Don't ask me how I know this...



Another good stretch to ward off PF is to use a dishtowel to form a sling around your arch, and pull gently towards you with your leg extended in a sitting position. Hold the stretch for 30 seconds or so.

I also emulate this stretch sometimes while driving long trips with the cruise control on. Flex your foot upwards towards your knee, and hold for 15 to 30 seconds. Don't do this with a foot that is currently in use on the accelerator or brake.

Onwards and upwards. Do you have a tendency to get blisters in one spot on your foot during an extended hike? We'll get into socks and boots momentarily, but as a short term remedy, there's a wicked cool invention called Mole Skin. It's a thick woven pad with adhesive on the back and can be trimmed to a shape to cover the afflicted area. However, apply the Mole Skin BEFORE a blister develops. If you put it on after the blister has formed, when you remove the Mole Skin patch, you also end up removing a large amount of skin. Again, do not ask me how I know this...

To ward off developing a blister in the first place, let's take a look at socks. Most hiking specialists recommend using Smart Wool or Merino wool socks. The woolen material wicks moisture away from your foot, it breathes well to get rid of that moisture, and is very soft. Socks developed for hikers usually have a thicker toe and heel area to cushion the impacts of walking on hard surfaces, and to help avoid forming blisters from the friction of your foot rubbing on the inside of your boot.

Hiking socks can be expensive, as much as \$18/pair, but I gladly fork over the money to pamper my paws. If you've ever had to endure the agony of a blister during a long hike, I think you'd pay a pretty penny not to have that throbbing raw spot in your boot whilst trying to enjoy the scenery.

Speaking of boots, they are the most critical part of taking care of your tootsies. Everyone has slightly different feet. Fitting your boot properly is essential to having a pain-free foot. Merrill's fit my feet very well, right out of the shoebox. Rene' has had the best luck with Vasque. Each manufacturer is going to have their own specific toe box configuration, width specifications, and arch support. My advice is to try as many as you can until you find that boot that fits like an Italian racing glove.

Ask for help from the boot salesperson. Maybe go to REI for that first big purchase, to zero in on which brand works for you the best. REI has simulated rock climbing steps to help you flex the boot and experience what they might feel like on the trail. And the salespeople are generally hikers, so they can be very helpful in giving advice and asking you about chafing spots and where your toes end up inside the boot. Mentally gird yourself when looking at the price tag. Egads! But if taken care of, a good pair of boots can last you 3-5 years. And it's difficult to put a price on having a pain-free hike.

I have three different sets of footgear I wear out on the trails. I use low top, soft sided hiking shoes when strolling on fairly level, dirt trails. I have a pair of mid-rise soft sided boots when hiking moderate, mixed-dirt and gravel trails. And then I have

the Beasts; high-topped, leather sided, heavy lugged sole boots for the really rocky desert and mountain trails. I like having the added ankle support when hiking over and through rocky areas to avoid twisting an ankle. The heavy lug soles keep the bottoms of my feet from feeling those tennis-ball sized rocks. These boots do get a tad warm in the desert, but the added support is worth it to me. Your mileage may vary, of course.

I'm not even going to get into sanding callouses with a stone, bunions, heel spurs, ingrown toenails, etc. I think some of this falls into personal hygiene. Besides, yeew! If you experience foot pain, see a podiatrist promptly. Foot problems can contribute to back and hip pain, so take care of those thing at the end of your legs. I think of those babies like the foundation of my house; if they're shaky, the house falls over.

Until next month, Happy Trails!

Burton Hill