

Trekking Poles

Hiking sticks make it easy on the knees

Gear has changed a lot since many of us started hiking. Perhaps one of the most obvious changes, other than the shift toward lightweight equipment, is the growing use of trekking poles among day hikers and long-distance hikers alike. Upon first glance, trekking poles resemble ski poles, sometime leading to awkward questions such as, “Isn’t July a bit early for skiing?” However, trekking poles differ from ski poles in some important ways. Trekking pole handles are often textured, and the poles themselves are rigid and strong, unlike flexible ski poles. Often, their tips are hardened carbide steel, with the ability to “set” into rock and soil to provide traction.

Hikers often ask how two trekking poles are better than one “regular” walking stick. The simplest answer to this question is that poles give symmetrical support that one stick does not. Hiking with trekking poles provides many distinct benefits, including:

Protecting knees: When walking downhill, poles allow the muscles of the upper body to “take over” some of the cushioning tasks often assumed by the quadriceps and smaller, discrete muscles that support the knee. This means that hikers using two trekking poles experience less knee pain—especially during descents, but also on level terrain.

Easing ascents: Poles also allow the muscles of the upper body to “help out” the legs during ascents. Walking up a steep hill, hikers with poles immediately notice that the ability to push off with poles gives them a distinct advantage. Poles can also correct posture during ascent, keeping your head elevated and your lungs fully expanded.

Increased stability: The occasional stumble is part of any hike. Poles provide two additional points of contact with the ground and enhance stability. Poles also allow hikers to brace themselves on their poles to remain steady and upright, instead of falling after a stumble.

These benefits are of interest to all hikers, but are of particular interest to older hikers, among whom knee pain is a common complaint.

But, despite clear enhancements to safety and enjoyment, hiking poles have their drawbacks. Many of them have hardened steel tips, which can scar rocks, increase erosion, and contribute to trail widening. Hikers should weigh these



possible impacts against the very real benefits that poles offer in deciding whether or not poles are the right choice for them.

If you do decide to use poles, keep these tips in mind to reduce your impact:

1. Consider rubber tips, which cover the sharpest part of the steel point and prevent them from scarring rocks, while still maintaining traction.
2. Place poles carefully. Avoid easily scarred rocks, fragile trailside vegetation, and other hikers.
3. Place poles narrowly. Try to confine your pole tips to the established tread surface of the trail.

Keeping these three simple tips in mind will help hikers take advantage of this new hiking tool while limiting negative impacts on the trail.

