

Why Carry Trekking Poles?

The Advantages of Trekking Poles

When you hike with a set of trekking poles you are balancing the weight distribution and shock over four limbs, instead of two. People who have used trekking poles discover an almost immediate benefit to their knee joints and leg muscles, especially on long downhill treks. Arm and shoulder muscles support and relieve the leg muscles. With the basic "hands above the heart" position necessitated by the poles, circulation is improved and heart rate is reduced. The "rhythm" created by walking with poles leads to relaxed, more regular breathing and increased stamina.

A landmark study published by Dr. G. Neureuther in 1981 proved that use of "ski poles" while walking reduces the pressure strain on the opposite leg by approximately 20%. Furthermore, while walking on level ground, poles reduce the body weight carried by the legs by approximately 5 kg every step. Move to an incline, and that reduction increases to 8 kg. This translates into tons of weight -- yes, tons -- for even a two hour hike. Backpackers with heavy loads often find them valuable for maintaining balance with a higher center of gravity.

Jacquie Hunt, editor of a popular hiking newsletter, weighs in with additional health benefits: "An advantage that I found once I started using poles is that my hands no longer swell up when it is hot. Keeping your arms moving so the blood doesn't pool in the hands is a lot safer than keeping hands high on pack straps and risking a smashed face if you trip."

Finally, poles help many people with balance issues. We all have different comfort levels when balancing along logs, crossing streams, walking on slippery surfaces, and hiking over loose rocks and scree; for some hikers, trekking poles are worth their weight in gold.

Not all poles are created equally. When you are adding trekking poles to your outdoor gear, there are a few key features you need to consider that will have a dramatic effect on your satisfaction.

It's a material world

What distinguishes different models – and affects price – are pole construction, shock absorption, and the materials used in handles and wrist straps. Most trekking poles are made from aluminum and weigh in at 18-22 ounces per pair. These are the cheapest. Some poles incorporate a lighter weight titanium-aluminum alloy, which reduces the total heft to roughly 14-17 ounces and are more expensive. Ultralight carbon fiber can reduce the weight to as little as 11 ounces but are the most expensive.

While lighter is righter, the cost of saving a few ounces also lightens up your wallet, and focusing on other features may provide better returns. For instance, consider the handles. Cheaper poles use stiff plastic, which can be hard on your hands after many hours of use. Better are poles that use dense foam, which has some give and provides a good grip. Some models extend the foam down the shaft —nice for choking up on the pole in steep sections. The best handles are made of cork, which become custom-molded to your hand with use.

A few styles also angle the handle forward by 15 degrees for a more ergonomically correct grip. Wrist straps vary in construction. Many inexpensive models include only a basic nylon strap, which can be uncomfortable and chafe your wrists after prolonged use. Look instead for straps that include some sort of padding.

Many poles feature a shock-absorption device, usually a spring, which is designed for downhill use. As the poles absorb the shock of downhill impact, the spring flexes to spare your arms and wrists some stress. This feature can, and should, be turned off for uphill sections, so you don't waste energy compressing the spring as you push off. These devices can be a nuisance, however, and some hikers claim they provide minimal difference in upper-body fatigue.

Pole position

Look for poles that have a telescopic adjustment. Poles that telescope offer several key benefits. First, multiple people can use the same set of poles simply by adjusting the length. Some poles practically collapse, much like an antenna on a portable radio. These poles are ideal if you don't plan to use them all the time and want to stow them in your pack, safely out of the way.

What is the best way to use trekking poles? It's pretty much "to each their own" – watch hikers with poles and you'll see a variety of methods employed. Some plant the pole with every step; some only after 2-3 steps. Some plant the poles on the same side as the forward foot; some the opposite. The "best" way is what works for you, but here are some general suggestions and comments:

When extending the pole, keep the three sections equal in length and do not extend any section out all the way—this can stress the pole and cause it to break or bend. Most poles have markings to help calibrate length. Set the pole length so your arms are bent at 90 degrees when the tips are on the ground and your hands are on the grips. This is a good compromise setting for flat, uphill or downhill. For extended incline segments, shorten the poles some so you can get better leverage to help you up the hill when you plant the pole. For extended decline segments, it's worth taking a few seconds to lengthen the poles so you're more upright as you plant the poles in front of you. If you are traversing a slope, shorten the uphill pole and lengthen the pole used on the downhill side as needed to support both sides of your body equally.



Critical to trekking pole use and enjoyment is proper use of the wrist straps. Many hikers simply stick their hands through the loop from above and let it dangle loosely over their wrist. This is incorrect, and accomplishes little other than preventing the pole from falling if you drop it. To properly use the straps, first insert your hand through the loop in an upward motion from underneath. Then grasp the handle, positioning the portion of the strap closest to the pole between thumb and index finger. Part of the strap should now lie between your hand and the grip, with the rest wrapping snugly around your wrist. Adjust the size of the loop to fit closely. With the straps properly fitted, you can much more effectively

transfer energy between the ground and your upper body. And one final word of caution: Once you use a pair of trekking poles, you may never go back.

Different Uses of Trekking Poles

A trekking pole can be used as a tent pole for a hiking fly or tent – either as the main pole or as a back-up in case of failure. If you're in the lead on the first hike of the day, a pole can be great for breaking down spider's webs strung across the track, or for chasing snakes and other wildlife. Some trekking poles have compasses in the top, or even a camera screw that can turn your trekking pole into a mono-pod for your camera. A pole can be a great resting spot for the forehead during those short breaks at the end of a particularly long trudging session. Simply lean forward and place your forehead on the pole. And have you ever taken a heavy pack off after a long walk and had no-where to lean it? Usually it is left lying on the ground with bits and pieces falling out and other stuff crawling in. A pole can be a perfect prop to keep the pack upright.

Care of trekking poles

Many of us use trekking poles for hiking and climbing. Most of us probably also toss them in the corner after a trip, assuming they'll be ready to go next time. That is a bad idea. Almost all poles are made of some form of anodized or painted aluminum alloy and this alloy can and will corrode. The good news is that with proper care and a little regular maintenance, these poles can last a lifetime. Here's some tips on how to make your investment last.

- After a trip, totally disassemble the poles. The only exception to this is the expander at the top of each section. You can remove this as well but it adds to the re-assembly time.
- Rinse off the mud and debris and clean the telescoping tubes with a damp sponge.
- Dry everything with an old towel.
- Let the units sit for a day or two to dry thoroughly.

- Corrosion can and will build up over time on the inside of the barrels reducing the ability of the expander to grip the barrel.

An appropriate wire brush used for cleaning the bore on a shotgun work well to clean these. This unit is composed of a wire brush mounted on a smaller threaded shaft. They are available at sporting goods stores that handle guns. Get a size that looks like it will match up to the bore of your poles. To remove corrosion, you will need to mount it on something that can be inserted into the tube. If you happen to have a shotgun cleaning kit, you can use the rod that is specifically designed for these. You can make your own. Use a $\frac{1}{4}$ " hardwood dowel and drill a hole in the end of it slightly smaller than the threads on the shotgun wire brush mounting. The brush easily threads into it. Once you have this unit in hand, insert it into the tube and pull it back and forth as you rotate it. Blow out the dust and do a final wipe with a soft felt or cotton swab attached to a long rod.