

How to set a steady hiking pace

Up one hill and down another: Before you know it, your pack weighs a ton and you're panting like a dog. But a hike does not have to be this tiring. A steady pace will conserve energy by ironing out all those ups and downs.



FINDING YOUR STRIDE



Find your stride during the first steps of a hike.

Everyone has a different stride (natural pace). Find yours during the first steps of a hike. It should be smooth — with **rhythmic breathing, swinging arms** and a **consistent length** to the step.

Maintaining that pace can be difficult. Slower hikers ahead on the trail slow your pace. Faster ones tempt you to hurry along.

Spreading out helps you maintain your pace, says Mark Anderson, director of program at Philmont Scout Ranch in New Mexico. "The truth is your pace can't be any faster than the slowest hiker in your group. It's important that the group stay together."

If not, when Scouts come to a fork in the trail they'll get separated. And if a problem arises

with hikers at the rear, the ones in front won't know about it and will keep going.

HEADING UPHILL ...

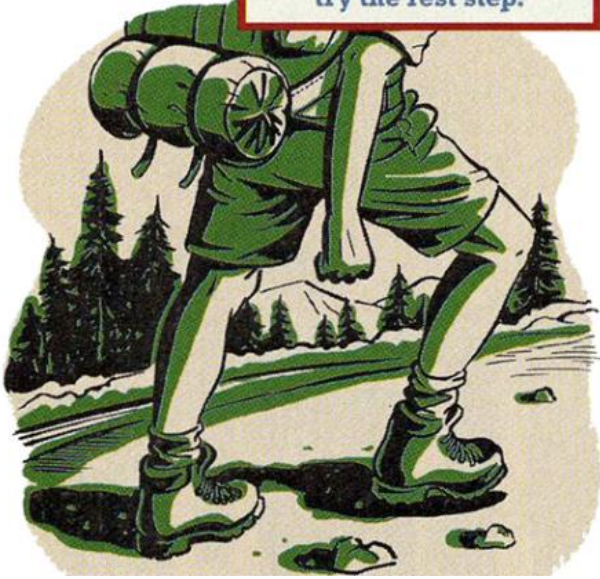
The 50- and 100-mile backpack treks offered at Philmont cover trails at 6,000 to 12,000 feet of elevation. **Shorten steps** to pull such grades but retain your rhythm.

Also, **step over objects** in the trail instead of stepping on them. Stepping up on logs and rocks in the trail all day is like climbing an extra thousand feet straight up.



Step over—not on—objects in the trail.

On the really steep parts
try the rest step.



“On the really steep parts you might try what we call the **rest step**,” suggests Mr. Anderson. “with each climbing step straighten either the forward or trailing leg (the rear leg is easier for me) and lock the knee. Pause for a second, letting the bones of the locked leg bear your weight. This gives the leg muscles a short rest between steps.”

... AND BACK DOWNHILL

The uphill struggle is rewarded with a downhill coast. “But,” Mr. Anderson cautions, “I see way more injuries to hikers going downhill because they’re not in control.”

A slight **bend in the knees** absorbs the shock to the feet and leg joints when coming downhill. Placing the feet flat on the ground provides more boot sole surface to grip the ground.

“If the going’s real rough you might even want to **side-step down** the trail,” he says.

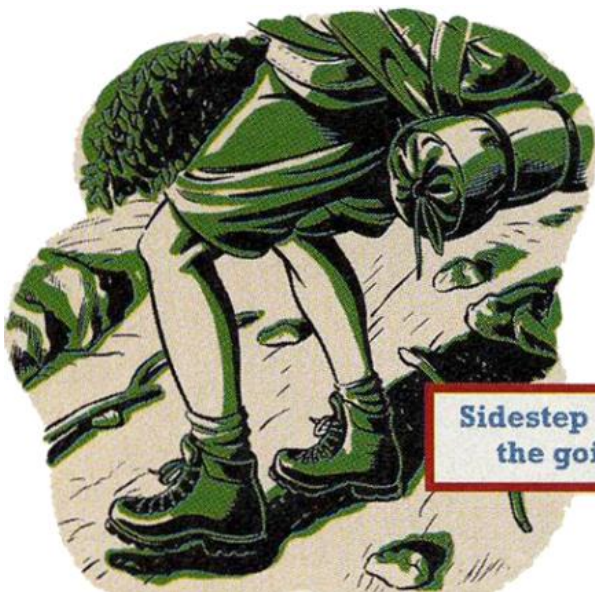


REST STOPS

Time between rest stops varies.

“Here at Philmont, with the hot and dry conditions and an uphill grade, you’ll want to rest every 20 or 30 minutes,” Mr. Anderson says. “At the least, you’ll want to stop every hour to readjust packs and drink some water.”

Limit rests to **five minutes** or so. Any longer and muscles tend to tighten, making it harder to resume your hiking rhythm.



Sidestep downhill when
the going is rough.

Sit and give your feet a break while resting. **Face downhill** so your pack rests on the ground, not on your aching back.

Leave the pack on, but loosen the hip belt and shoulder straps. That eliminates lifting the pack and struggling back into the belt and straps.

With a break and a drink, you're ready to hit the trail again with a steady step.



HELPING HAND

A walking stick lends a supporting hand while crossing streams or rough spots on a trail. Many hikers use the enduring wooden staff.

Modern trekking poles made of metal and/or plastics are lighter and provide a molded grip. Some hikers clutch a trekking pole in each hand. The swinging poles help keep a fluid pace.

You can carve your own wooden walking stick. [Click here](#) to find how-to plans for creating your own.

How to Improve Your Hiking Technique

Ever wonder why some people seem to be able to hike tirelessly? This article explains how to do just that: hike further, faster, and with greater ease. Look below for more information.

1. **Invest in a good pair of hiking boots.** Good boots are critical and sometimes expensive. They don't have to be expensive boots (though professionally fitted boots are the best). It is best to know the specific or varied environments in which the hiking will be conducted, this will allow you to select a pair of boots that are appropriate for the conditions. For instance, water resistant features on a boot may be appropriate in areas that experience moderate to low temperatures and heavy rain because they will often lengthen the time during which you can hike with warm, dry feet. Conversely, water resistant boots have little use in a dry climate as they will often prevent your feet from pushing the collected moisture from your feet and socks to the surrounding air. This will result in clammy, and often blistered feet. Boots do have to be comfortable after a period of break-in, durable, and properly fitted. Keep in mind that



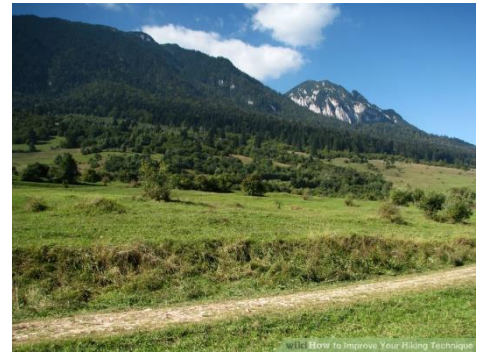
oftentimes a lightweight, "broken-in out-of-the-box" composite boot may not last as long as a full leather boot that requires time and energy to achieve optimal break-in."

Running shoes or sneakers *may* not provide the support or stability necessary for hiking, but only if you have weak ankles. Once you've built them up sufficiently, hiking in lightweight running or trail shoes has many benefits such as ventilation, less fatigue, and greater dexterity. The "marketing-thought" that our ankles cannot support us in uneven terrain is nonsense, unless your ankles are weak to start, you're carrying a very large load (backpacking), or, on a different note, are hiking somewhere wet (running shoes get very damp).

Approach shoes (a cross between hiking boots and climbing shoes) may be adequate.

2. **Train.** The more fit you are, the more fun any given hike will be. If you're not in shape, start small. Walk around your neighborhood, climb stairs when you have an opportunity, or take shorter hikes at first. Build up from there, choosing longer, more challenging hikes. Other physical activities, such as **bicycle riding**, stair climbing, and jogging, can also contribute to your overall fitness level. There are many options for training, so read up, and then get out there.

Trail hiking is different than neighborhood walks on flat pavement, so make sure it is part of your regimen if you are training to hike.



3. **Maintain an even cadence.** Cadence is "a recurrent rhythmical series" of steps. Good hikers have good cadence. Their steps happen consistently at the same length and in the same amount of time. For example, good cadence might be stepping (from heel to toe) approximately 2.75 feet (0.8 m) in every step, and taking approximately .80 seconds to take each step - and doing that consistently.

To find your cadence, find a hill, preferably paved, with a consistent slope. It does not need to be tremendously steep, but should be at least a couple hundred feet long.

With your boots on, hike the hill 2-3 times a day. Focus on one thing: stepping the same length in the same amount of time consistently. This cadence should feel natural. You don't need to take large or fast steps, just natural feeling, consistent steps. You should be able to keep your shoulders straight and back upright, with **good posture**.

Continue hiking this hill focusing on your cadence until you find that natural cadence. When you do, you should be able to settle into that cadence and notice that you climb the hill faster with less effort than when not settling into that cadence. You will notice that you can pass people, that are in relatively that same shape as you, with less effort than they are putting forth.

4. **Take your cadence to the trail.** Once keeping good cadence is easy on pavement, learn to keep that cadence on the trail. Find a relatively easy trail. (In some areas, these will be designated with a green circle or maybe a blue square, but definitely no black diamonds.) Hike that trail a few times a week, focusing on your cadence. Once you get that down, find a trail with some rocks and ruts in it. Then, choose a trail that changes slope and pitch several times. Then, move to harder and harder trails until you can keep a good cadence on almost any trail.
5. **Adjust for steep terrain.** When you start ascending steep terrain, it will be much more efficient to take shorter steps. Continue to keep a good rhythm, but cut each stride by one-half to one-third the length of your regular steps. This will decrease the energy it takes to make the ascent.
6. **Learn to use a walking stick or trekking poles.** Once your cadence has become natural, without these tools, then slowly start using your arm muscles to help you.

Get yourself a good **walking stick** or have a professional help you pick some appropriate trekking poles.

Adjust the stick or poles to the correct height for you. Using sticks or poles, swing your arms opposite of your stepping foot; and match your cadence. Eventually, you will take much of the effort of the trail off your feet and into your arms, which would otherwise be doing little else for you.

Remember, if using a stick or a pole is messing up your cadence, then it isn't doing you any good.