

Seniors and the Benefits of Hiking

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It's no secret that for people of all ages, regular exercise is one of the key factors to a healthy lifestyle. However, as they age, many seniors have difficulty finding a safe way to stay active, which can compound their existing health issues.

Learn more about the unique benefits of hiking for seniors.

Health Benefits of Hiking

Dr. Michael Pratt, the acting chief for the Physical Activity and Health Branch at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta (CDC) told [American Trails](#) that “statistics show that most older adults aren’t getting enough activity and we know that they stand to benefit from regular exercise.” When it comes to regular activity, walking is one of the best forms of exercise for seniors.

“Walking is a tremendously good activity for senior citizens. It’s cheap, it’s simple, almost anybody can do it,” Dr. Pratt says. “It helps seniors and has very real benefits for maintaining mobility and independence.”



A study published in the [Journal of the American Geriatric Society](#) showed that “seniors who walked at least four hours per week reduced their risk of hospitalization as a result of cardiovascular events.” Hiking is a great way for seniors to get out and enjoy a regular walk, and because hiking trails are often softer on joints than asphalt or concrete, hiking can actually be easier for frail seniors than going for a walk on the street.

The benefits of hiking are well documented, showing that seniors who hike regularly experience:

- Improved [circulation](#)
- Improved [cardiovascular health](#)
- Reduced [arthritis, joint and knee pain](#)
- A [boost in bone density](#) which can improve bone health and reduce the risk of osteoporosis
- [Lower levels of depression](#) and [feelings of isolation](#)
- Improved [muscle strength](#) when hiking on a slight incline.

[Studies also show](#) that seniors who go on one or two hikes per week experience an increase in their cognitive function and higher scores on tests for memory and reaction time.

Hiking is a Family Affair

Hiking is a great way for multi-generational families to spend time together while getting exercise and staying healthy. Everyone from young children, to parents, to grandparents and even great grandparents can participate in a hike. Getting out together as a family for a hike could be the motivation that a parent you’re caring for needs to get up and get active.

Choose the Right Trail

If you’re caring for an older senior, you may be wondering whether a hike would be too much for them. Hiking is an excellent form of exercise for all activity levels —depending on the trail you choose. Start off with a short, flat, easy trail and then increase the trail’s length and difficulty level over time. Depending on where you live, there may or may not be

the right trail near you. Don't be afraid to drive to a trail – most have trail heads with parking, and this is a great way to spend a sunny Saturday or Sunday.

If your parent is in a wheelchair or has limited mobility then look for accessible trails that are flat and have a boardwalk and wheelchair ramps (many do, especially trails around active adult retirement communities, assisted living communities, and nursing homes).

If your parent is not in a wheelchair, but you're concerned that a hike may be too much for them then talk to their doctor about a mobility aid. Seniors with arthritis and joint pain can use mobility aids for hiking to reduce the risk of injury or a fall. Examples of mobility aids include canes, hiking sticks and staffs, trekking poles, and Nordic walking poles.

Be Prepared

No matter what age you are it's important that you do a little preparation for your hike before you set off. For senior citizens to hike safely, it's important to:

- Stay hydrated – bring lots of water and if carrying traditional bottles of water is too much consider a water backpack
- Wear a good pair of walking shoes
- Wear layers to adjust for changes in weather – light clothes in the summer and warm clothes in the fall
- Wear a sun hat and apply sunscreen
- Bring along an emergency kit, which must contain:
 - A first aid kit
 - Food/water
 - A way to communicate in case you run into trouble (remember that cell phones don't always get reception in the forest)
- Know the trail and have a map in case you get lost
- Have a safety plan – let someone know where you're planning on going hiking, your route and when you'll be back

Join a Hiking Group for Seniors

There are many different hiking groups that are geared for seniors of all levels. If you want to hike, but don't know anyone who will go with you then look around your community. A group hike is a great way to hike safely while having an opportunity to make new friends and socialize. Many senior community centers, retirement communities and municipalities offer free hiking or walking programs for seniors.

The Portland Parks & Recreation's Senior Recreation program hosts weekly hiking trips. In fact, the program is so popular it can't always accommodate all the seniors who want to join. [Check out their catalog](#) for hike information and register early! [Berks County, Pennsylvania](#) also has a number of hiking groups for seniors.

The [Senior Hiking Initiative](#) is a Hike Ontario program for adults who are +55 years old. The program is supported by the Ontario Sport and Recreation Communities Fund and the Older Adult Centres' Association of Ontario. The program is designed to provide free training (a Safe Hiker Program Course) and a strong support system for novice hikers and walkers. The Senior Hiking Initiative was designed especially for seniors who don't have anyone to hike with, or who have never hiked before.

So, if you're looking for a way to get active and exercise safely, then give hiking a try. It's a great activity for seniors of all ages and ability levels, and an ideal excursion for boomers who are caring for an older adult parent.

Have you or your senior loved one taken up hiking? We would love to hear about your personal experiences and hiking adventures in the comments below!

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