

Conditioning for Backpacking

Few experiences convey a sense of well-being better than a walk through an old-growth forest or up to and along a view-packed ridgeline. To reap those intangible rewards, it's best if you first prepare yourself with some basic, tangible benefits of sensible physical conditioning.

The amount of conditioning you need depends on your current fitness level and the kinds of trips you have planned.

If you exercise regularly, you may be ready for short trips and easy terrain right now. But if you don't get as much exercise as you'd like, set up a basic training regimen prior to your first trip to wake up sleeping muscles and get your lungs working more efficiently.

The best way to train for backpacking is to mimic the activity as closely as possible.

Start Moving

- Begin with shorter, less strenuous hikes and a light backpack.

Nothing gets muscles ready for the trail better than the trail itself. Start with shorter hikes and minimal elevation gain carrying a light daypack.

- Gradually increase the length and elevation of your hikes and increase your backpack load.

As you begin to strengthen your lower body and improve your endurance, switch to longer, more challenging hikes. Loading your backpack with the gear and weight you are most likely to carry will help you become familiar with conditions you will face deep in the backcountry.

If you don't have a chance to hike the great outdoors as much as you'd like, find the next-best option.

Hit the Gym

- Try stair-steppers, elliptical trainers and climbing machines.

These machines provide a great cardiovascular and strength training work out. They isolate your lower-body muscle groups and help build endurance.

- Consider step aerobics.

Check out your local gym to see if they offer step aerobics. Or, do step aerobics at home with a bench and instructional video.

- Lift weights.

A backpacker does not particularly want to transport a huge upper-body mass on the trail. Still, a consistent, diversified weight-resistance program helps prepare muscle groups all over your body for the sudden jolt of full-time, all-day physical activity. Trained muscles are less susceptible to injury and strains.

- Swim.

A great aerobic workout, swimming is easy on the joints and good for the lungs and heart.

Use the Resources Around You

- Climb the stairs in your house, office or around the neighborhood.

Take the stairs whenever possible. Walking or running up and down them on a regular basis is terrific pre-trail training. You can even mimic step aerobics by just running up 1 step and then back down, repeating the motion.

- Walk instead of driving.

If you can perform certain routine chores by leaving your car keys in your pocket, do it. Walk to the library, the park or the store. Toss a weighted daypack on your back for a little extra benefit.

- If you've got a bike, start pedaling.

Cycling is an excellent way to condition your legs and increase endurance.

NOTE: Jogging is a popular training option for people trying to get in shape for backpacking. But use caution if you're not already a runner, since jogging can also lead to muscle strains that backpacking may aggravate.

Time Frame

How long will it take to get into condition for backpacking? That depends on you. The better shape you're in now, the quicker you can cultivate the conditioning needed for a long-haul trip. The more diligence you show in your conditioning efforts, and the more lead time you allow yourself, the happier you'll be on the trail.

Be patient and listen to your body. Try to do some form of exercise at least 3 times a week for a minimum of 30 minutes and get out on the trails for shorter hikes as soon as possible with your backpack.

Before starting any exercise program, **always consult a physician.**