FEATURE

AARP's Smart Guide to Hiking

Take a look at our tips and tricks for hitting the trail, whether on foot or on horseback.

Andrea Mustain, AARP
Updated 08/08/2022

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Hiking is a great way to get healthy, though it can seem pretty daunting if you haven't done it before. Fortunately, it doesn't have to be that difficult and can be as easy or challenging as you want it to be. Here's how to get started, from choosing the right trail to what to wear and what to bring along.

Some of the tips and tricks we've gathered here are from our friends at the Appalachian Trail Conservancy, which is a great place to learn about hiking and backpacking. Other tips come from our own experts, including Kathleen Kingsbury, who hiked the Appalachian Trail in her 60s, and Jim Cummins, who hiked the Pacific Crest Trail in his 70s. We've also included some tips from our friends at the Appalachian Mountain Club, which is a great place to learn about hiking in the Northeastern United States.

Enjoy the journey, and remember that hiking is a lifelong sport. Happy trails!

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GET READY TO GET MOVING

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1. Talk to your doctor

Hiking is a great way to get some exercise, but it's a strenuous activity and can cause injuries. Talking to your doctor about your health and your plan to hike can help you avoid any problems. Your doctor can also offer you tips and tricks, or suggest fellow hikers who might be willing to share their experience with you.

"Everything you do is a conversation," says Kathleen Kingsbury, 72, who hiked the Appalachian Trail in her 60s. "Talk to your doctor, talk to your friends, talk to your family, talk to your neighbors. Everybody has something to say about what you're doing, and it's helpful to have a community of people who are behind you." Kingsbury, who also hiked the Pacific Crest Trail, hiked with her husband, Jim Cummins, who hiked the Appalachian Trail in his 60s and the Pacific Crest Trail in his 70s. Cummins, who is now 80, says he's been hiking since he was a boy in Boy Scouts and Explorer Scouts. He and his wife have hiked with their children and grandchildren, and they've taught their grandchildren how to hike.

2. Find your muscles

Once you've gotten the green light from the doctor, consider working on your fitness. Hiking can be challenging, and it's better if you're in shape. Kingsbury says she hiked every day for months before she started her hike.

"I had hiking on my mind for a long time, and I was trying to get in shape," she says. Cummins says he also hiked every day for months before his hike, and he recommends that people who are planning to hike do some hiking in advance.

"Hiking is a sport," he says. "It's a sport that requires a lot of stamina." Cummins says he hiked with a 40-pound pack, and he recommends that people who are planning to hike do some hiking with a heavy pack.

3. Make up your mind

People who have never been to the Appalachian Trail often underestimate how difficult it is, Kingsbury says. The trail is 2,200 miles long and it crosses 14 states. The terrain includes very rocky trails, steep inclines, and bitter weather. Hikers must be prepared for all kinds of weather, and they need to be physically and mentally tough. Kingsbury says she had to overcome her fear of bears and the fear of being alone in the woods. She also had to overcome her fear of snakes.

"I had to make up my mind that I'm not afraid of bears," she says. "I'm not afraid of snakes." Kingsbury says she had to overcome her fear of snakes, and she learned to recognize the sounds of the rattlesnake so she could avoid it if she heard it.

Cummins says he had to overcome his fear of bears and his fear of snakes. He says he had to overcome his fear of spiders, which is a common fear among people who are afraid of hiking. He says he had to overcome his fear of spiders by "just accepting them and getting on with it." Cummins also had to overcome his fear of heights.

4. Find a hiking partner — and go!

Hiking can be a great way to meet people who share your interests and your values. Kingsbury says she met many people on the Appalachian Trail who became her friends. Cummins says he met people who became his friends, and he also met people who became his enemies. He says he had to overcome his fear of being alone in the woods.

"I had to overcome my fear of being alone in the woods," he says. "I had to overcome my fear of being with people I didn't know."

Kathleen Kingsbury, AARP Hiking Expert

Jim Cummins, AARP Hiking Expert

5. Find your gear

Hiking is a sport that requires a lot of gear. Fortunately, you don't need to buy all of the gear you see in the stores. You can borrow it, you can rent it, you can buy it secondhand, and you can buy it new. Kingsbury says she borrowed most of her gear from her friends, and she also bought some of her gear secondhand. Cummins says he bought most of his gear secondhand, and he also borrowed some of his gear from his friends.

Kingsbury says she recommends that people who are planning to hike do some hiking in advance so they can figure out what they need and what they don't need. She also says it's important to find a good pair of hiking boots.

"Find a good pair of hiking boots," she says. "Find a good pair of hiking boots, and wear them in."

Cummins says he recommends that people who are planning to hike do some hiking with a heavy pack so they can get used to carrying the weight. He says he had to overcome his fear of being alone in the woods, and he also had to overcome his fear of being with people he didn't know.

"When you are embarking on the trail, it's a bit uncomfortable to be with people you don't know," he says. "You have to overcome that. You have to be able to be comfortable with people you don't know."

Cummins says he also had to overcome his fear of heights. He says he had to "just accept it and get on with it." He says he had to "just accept it and get on with it" when he was afraid of bears and snakes.

6. Find a friend

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Some of the people we met on the Appalachian Trail were "trail angels," people who offered us food and shelter and helped us in other ways. Some of the people we met were "trail angels" themselves, offering food and shelter to hikers. Many of the people we met were "trail angels" to each other, helping each other in many ways. Some of the people we met were "trail angels" to us, and we were "trail angels" to other people.

Hiking can be a great way to meet people who share your interests and your values. Hikers come from all walks of life, and they come from all over the world. They come from different backgrounds and they have different jobs. They have different hobbies and they have different interests. They have different ideas about what is important in life. But they all share a love of the outdoors and a love of hiking