

How to Do It »



The author on the Perry Creek Trail in fall with her trusty ski poles.

Photo by Barbella Magas

Hiking With Poles

Take a load off your legs with a pair of hiking poles

Poles are for sissies—or so I thought fifteen years ago when I started serious hiking again. They clitter-clattered on the trail like grandma's cane and made me feel like an old lady. Then I slipped while crossing a stream on a frigid November day and plunged off the stones into the icy water. Okay, I guess poles are good for balance while crossing streams.

Then I went backpacking for the first time. I marched 10 miles up the Hoh River Trail, and by the time I reached the campsite, my back was aching and my knees were rubbery. The next time, I used poles, and I arrived at camp ready to set up the tent and get to work on the trail. I guess poles are good for distributing the

load, too.

In fact, sports medicine doctors say that a pair of trekking poles can take as much as 40 percent of the load off your legs. They help you go further, and you arrive in better condition. They are great for saving the knees when going downhill, and you'll get an arm workout, too. In the snow they not only help with balance, but can chop foot grips into steep inclines. I hang my wet gloves on them when I'm taking a lunch break.

I suppose a pair of poles could come in handy if you meet anything furry with teeth and claws on the trail, but it's best for all concerned not to disturb the wildlife. The clitter-clatter on the trail may actually be a good way of letting critters know you are coming so they can scurry into hiding.

Trekking poles come in all shapes, sizes and colors and can range from \$60 to \$160. Retail outlets usually give deep discounts on poles during sales, where you can find prices as much as 60 percent off. Be sure to check the used poles for sale in the rental section to get an even better deal. You can also find bargains on on-line sites such as Craigslist.

Trekking poles are a marvel of modern engineering technology. They usually have a grip with a strap on one end and a telescoping shank. This telescoping feature is really curious. You can take up to fifteen minutes fussing with the adjustment before you set off on the trail and inevitably the darned thing gets loose and slips back into the shank before you reach the top. One advantage of adjustable poles is that you can make them longer or shorter for the ascent or descent. But I find I don't need this feature.

That's why I went with old ski poles. I paid \$10 for a pair that were just my size at a ski rental place. They have a small snow catcher on the bottom and a strong, lightweight one-piece tube of aluminum up to the handle. They work great. They never collapse, they take a lot of punishment, and they don't upstage my own fashion statement, which is a combination of REI and Value Village.

The only drawback to using ski poles for trekking is that they are a bit clumsy when you have to scramble. I did manage to stuff them into my backpack when I ascended Bean Peak, where there were no overhead trees to grab them. On other scrambles, such as Silver Peak, I just leave the poles at the bottom until I return for them.

Whether you use trekking poles or ski poles, there is another benefit rarely realized. They are good for developing ambidexterity. My hiking partner and I have been at this for a while, and we can flip twigs and branches off the trail with our poles without even breaking stride. For the bigger stuff, there is my saw—but that's another story. ♦

Janice Van Cleve

Janice is a WTA member and writer from Seattle.