



Peak Conditioning

Get yourself in shape so your next hike is a breeze

Imagine yourself high up on an alpine ridge. Wildflowers wave in the gentle breeze as you sprawl on a granite slab, taking in the surrounding peaks. Now imagine that the hike to all this was also enjoyable—maybe even fairly easy. If this is the scenario you'd like to experience this hiking season, now is the time to start your conditioning. Most trainers suggest an eight- to twelve-week training program to get in shape.

The good news is that you don't have to

spend the next three months in the gym. The best way to prepare yourself to hike is actually by hiking. By engaging in regular aerobic activity and spending a couple of short sessions per week focusing on strength and flexibility, you'll be able to hike your way into optimal fitness. Decide what your goal is: what distance and elevation gain do you want to be able to complete in a day? Then build a training program that has you reaching 80 to 90 percent of that goal a couple of weeks before the hike.

Hiker Sherri Cassutto takes a stretching break on the High Divide Trail in the Olympics. By working on strength, endurance, flexibility and balance, you'll make your time on trail more enjoyable.

Pam Roy

Pam Roy is a WTA Fireside Circle member from Everett.



Build your cardiovascular endurance by running, walking fast, or climbing stairs regularly.

Photo by Pam Roy

Cardio

Regular aerobic activity is important to increase your cardiovascular capabilities. This gives you the ability to reach those scenic vistas with less huffing and puffing. Since hiking is a lower-intensity activity (the ability to keep a steady pace is more important than sprinting) optimal cardiovascular training will be at 60 to 80 percent of your maximum heart rate. A heart rate monitor can be worn while exercising to keep you working at an intensity that's difficult enough to be beneficial.

Use cardio training to slowly build an aerobic base. Selecting activities that use the same muscles as hiking can help prepare you for time on the trail. Running, walking fast, or climbing stairs are good activities. Indoor exercises could include an elliptical trainer, Stairmaster or stationary bike. Cross-training with low-impact activities such as biking, swimming, and inline skating reduces the risk of injuries, and adds variety and freshness to your workouts. A day of some swimming gives you a chance to recover from hiking uphill the day before. Start and end each session with a short warm-up and cooldown: take a brisk five-minute walk before and after a run, for instance.

Begin with a duration and intensity that reflects your current level of fitness (be honest here). During the week, plan three days of thirty- to sixty-minute walks. Increase the

benefit of these walks by choosing routes off pavement, and include hills and rolling, uneven terrain. Trails at Discovery Park, Tiger Mountain, Cougar Mountain and Meadowdale County Park all have hills to climb. Vary the route to keep things interesting. Schedule walks with a friend to reduce the likelihood of canceling a walk. Wear a pack on at least two of these walks each week. Start out with a light pack, (ten pounds) and build up gradually over the twelve weeks. Use water bottles or a hydration bladder for weight. Add other gear as you develop strength, increasing weight by 3 to 5 pounds maximum per week until getting to the weight you plan to carry on your targeted hike.

On the weekends, plan a longer hike, carrying a pack. Build gradually up to the distance and elevation gain you want to be able to hike. Add no more than 10 to 20 percent to your distance and elevation gain per week.

Once you've established an aerobic base, add tempo training to help those uphill sections of trail melt away. Find some hills or stairs. Hike uphill moderately fast, at a tempo where you cannot quite carry on a conversation and maintain that pace for thirty to sixty seconds initially. Slow down until your heart rate drops and your breathing returns to near normal. Repeat until you can do five of these. Increase over several weeks to two to three minutes of fast tempos. Ease up on the downhills to avoid over-stressing joints.

Strength

Traversing scree slopes, inching across slippery logs and carrying a pack all require more than just strong lungs and legs. Building core strength (in your stomach, hips, pelvis, back and upper body) will make hiking more enjoyable, minimize sore shoulders and back and increase your control. Build core strength with exercises like the plank, dead bug and pilates training.

Build leg strength with the following exercises. Repeat each exercise 8-10 times

Lunges: Step forward, keeping torso upright. Front knee should line up behind toe. Drop back knee to ground. Walk forward 8-10 paces initially.

Step ups: Use a platform or step tall enough so your thigh is parallel with ground when you step up. Step up with right leg, putting entire foot on step, then step up with left foot. Lower right foot to ground.

Heel downs: Stand on top of platform. Lower right leg so the heel touches the ground, then return to starting position. Builds quads, hamstrings, glutes, calves and hips.

Squats: Stand with feet hip distance apart. Extend arms. Bend knees as if to sit. Be sure knees stay aligned over ankle. Don't bend past 90 degrees. Return to starting position. Builds quads, glutes, hamstrings.

Build upper body strength to carry your pack

and scramble over boulders with exercises like the wood chopper, pushups, dumbbell rows, biceps curls, triceps curls and bench press.

The Plank: Start by positioning yourself on your knees and forearms with your elbows in line under your shoulders. Interlace your fingers so your forearms form a V. Now push up onto the balls of your feet. Keep your back straight and draw-in your belly button so that your abdominal muscles are tight. Hold this position for 5 seconds. Relax to starting position. Repeat 5-10 times. Increase the length of time you hold the position or increase the repetitions.

The Woodchopper: Stand with feet shoulder width apart. Clasp hands together and hold them above right shoulder. Move clasped hands quickly from right shoulder across body to outside of left leg, keeping arms straight with elbows slightly bent. Repeat for sixty seconds. Then change sides. Strengthens lower back, lats, abs and shoulder muscles. As you progress, this can be done with a medicine ball or light pack.

Dumbbell Row: Place your left knee and hand on a chair or bench. Hold a light dumbbell (or gallon jug) in your right hand. Think of your back as a table, and try to hold your torso still. Reach down to the floor and slightly forward with your right hand, then pull the weight up along a slight diagonal as though you're pulling the weight to your hip. Keep the elbow in close to the body. Repeat on the other side for the same number of repetitions and sets. Strengthens lats, deltoids and biceps. (Description from

www.bodyresults.com).

Pushups: An old standby. Modify by starting on knees rather than toes or standing about one to two feet away from a wall so that when arms are held straight out, palms will be flat against wall. Slowly bend elbows to bring body closer to wall. Exhale as you push back away from wall, straightening arms.

Shoulder Press: Stand with feet shoulder width apart, knees slightly bent. Hold a dumbbell in each hand, (wrists facing forward) keep abdominals tight to support the back, and exhale as you press the weight straight up over your head. Keep arms in front of the shoulders and narrow above you. Strengthens shoulders (deltoids, triceps, abdominals). Start with 5 lbs. to 10 lbs. depending on your current strength.

Biceps curls: Stand with feet shoulder width apart, knees slightly bent, a dumbbell in each hand. Keep palms facing the midline of your body throughout exercise. Keep the elbows tucked against your body as you lift the weight up to your shoulders. Do not let the elbows come forward. Inhale as you lower the weight, exhale as you lift.

For descriptions of these and other exercises, see www.bodyresults.com.

Sound like a lot? These can be done in thirty minutes at home twice a week. Add weight, length or increase intensity to continue to improve your level of conditioning.

Extra credit: do most of the leg and upper body exercises wearing a pack.

Below, left: Use a platform or box to do step ups and step downs to increase leg strength. Below, right: squats can help build strength in your quads, glutes and hamstrings. Wear a small pack, and take care not to bend past 90 degrees.

Photos by Pam Roy



Build upper body and back strength by doing "The Plank," being sure to tuck your belly in and keep your legs straight.

Photo by Pam Roy



Flexibility

Hikers should stretch at least three times per week. Hold each stretch thirty seconds and repeat two times. Yoga promotes flexibility and can also be very beneficial to the hiker. Carrying a heavy pack tends to compress the spine. Yoga postures like salute to the sun and downward dog can help decompress the spine. Yoga instructor Roy Holman recommends simply folding forward from the waist and letting arms hang down as a great stretch for the back after carrying a pack (www.HolmanHealthConnections.com)

Balance

To help navigate that knife-edged ridge, or leap from boulder to boulder in a river crossing wearing a pack, spend some time improving your balance.

One simple exercise to improve balance is to stand on one foot. Simply lift up one leg and maintain balance. To increase challenge, close your eyes. For fun, stand on one foot and toss a ball back and forth with your hiking buddy who's also standing on one foot.

Rest

Rest is an important part of any training program. Give yourself two rest days a week initially, then taper to one rest day. This avoids overtraining and burnout. Your muscles need time to repair themselves. Once a month, have one week where you do not increase any of the distances or elevations and use this as a recovery week. Overtraining is one of the most common reasons people ditch their training programs or peak too early in the process.

If you've been ill, or injured or haven't been exercising regularly, it's important to consult your doctor before starting any conditioning program. Most important is to keep it fun. Let this be the season that finds you grinning as you scamper up the trails. ♦

A Weekly Workout

This plan, to prepare you for a rigorous day hike, such as Mount Si, was created by Courtenay Schurman, certified strength conditioning specialist and owner of Body Results (www.BodyResults.com).

Weeks 1-2

Get moving! 3 times per week.

Cardio: 2 times per week. 20-30 min. each, 60-70 percent maximum heart rate (MHR). Choose walking, jogging, stairs, stair master, treadmill, Elliptical machine, or hill hiking.

Activity Specific: Weekend hike (Tiger, Little Si) with a 10-lb. pack, gain 800-1,000 feet elevation gain, gentle pace.

Weeks 3-4

Develop a stronger fitness foundation 3-5 times per week.

Cardio: 2 times per week, 30-45 min., 65-70 percent MHR. Same choices as weeks 1-2.

Activity Specific: Weekend hike with 10-15-lb. pack, gaining 1,000-1,200 feet of elevation gain.

Strength: Two times per week, full body, 20 min. Two sets of 12-15 reps, 6-8 major muscle group free-weight exercises specific to climbing, hiking or scrambling.

Weeks 5-6

Build muscular strength 4-6 times per week.

Cardio: 3 times per week, 45 min., 65-75 percent MHR; in-city hill hike with 15-20-lb. pack

Activity Specific: Weekend hike with 15-20-lb. pack, gaining 1,200-1,500 feet of gain.

Strength: 2 times per week, 20-30 min., 2-3x 8-10 reps, full body strength, added weight.

Weeks 7-8

Increase muscular endurance 4-6 times per week.

Cardio: 3 times per week, 45-60 min, 60-75 percent MHR; 1 of 3: hill intervals or stairs with 20-lb. pack.

Activity Specific: Weekend hike with 20-lb. pack; 1,500-2,000 feet of elevation gain.

Strength: 2 times/week, 30-45 min., 2-3x 12-15 reps, do exercises different from weeks 3-6

Learn More

Body Results hikers main page: www.bodyresults.com/s2hiking.asp

Yoga Conditioning for Athletes with Rodney Yee by Gaiam

Yoga for Athletes Interactive Yoga Series by Bodywisdom

Conditioning for Outdoor Fitness by David Musnick, M.D. and Mark Pierce (The Mountaineers Books)