

Fun Fact of the Week

9 Amazing Benefits of Hiking – Physical, Mental and Social*

By Gavin Evans

What are the Benefits of Hiking?

There's a reason why, for decades, the answer to all kinds of ailments has been to 'walk it off'. Heading out into the great outdoors has been a widely accepted cure for all kinds of problems, from stress and anxiety, to feeling sluggish after an extra-large roast dinner.

But, unlike avoiding swimming within an hour of eating, this is no old wives' tale. Walking outside really does actively benefit us – and there's arguably no better way to engage in this ancient practice than to strap on your finest walking boots, grab some walking poles and head out on a hike. But what exactly are the benefits of hiking?



From boosting fitness, to improving mental wellbeing – and even helping us in our social lives, hiking offers all kinds of tangible benefits. We thought that we'd break a few of these down in a handy list, so that next time you're heading out into the wilderness on a long walk, you'll not only feel fantastic – you'll know why.

And if you ever need a little extra justification for bringing a friend or loved one along for the experience – you'll have plenty of reasons as to why hiking is so good for us...

1. Improves overall fitness, and builds muscles

We all know just how important exercise is for our overall health. We're constantly reminded how vital it is that we factor in regular exercise into our daily and weekly routines, but for many of us, this can be tricky.

The ever-looming presence of the gym, with its sterile machines and intimidating hardcore patrons, can make the concept of regularly working out less than appealing – which is where hiking comes in. One of the biggest benefits of hiking is that it actively contributes to our overall levels of fitness in a big way.

While cardiovascular activities like running and cycling are great (depending on your definition of 'great', admittedly), hiking can actually offer equal – if not even better – [benefits in terms of fitness](#). The muscle groups stimulated during a good hike include quadriceps, hamstrings, and our lower leg

and hip muscles – and hiking with a backpack is a great boost to core strength. Plus, walking is a weight-bearing exercise, so it helps to build bone density.

2. Helps you lose weight

It's not just our core fitness levels and muscles that receive a vital boost during a good walk – one of the other great health benefits of hiking is that it helps us to lose weight. Lots and lots of weight. [According to Livestrong](#), hiking can burn between 440 and 550 calories *per hour*.

That is a lot. A big lot. If you weigh an average of 160lbs, and you went for a 3-hour hike, you could potentially burn upwards of 1200 calories – more than half of the recommended daily intake for an adult. Do this twice a week? You've effectively burned off 1-1.5 days' worth of calories. Phew!

It's worth pointing out that the way we all think about weight and calories intake and burn is deeply personal – everyone will have different goals, and it will be more important to some than others. There are also a lot of other factors to our weight profiles, particularly diet, but if weight-loss is something you're actively pursuing, hiking could be a fantastic addition to your routine.

3. Improves blood pressure, and lowers risk of heart disease

One of the great things about regularly engaging in a spot of good exercise is the fact that the benefits are all-encompassing. This is particularly true when it comes to blood pressure and how healthy our hearts are – and it's not surprising to hear that the health benefits of hiking don't just include weight loss and a boost to fitness: it's a fantastic way to lower blood pressure and the risk of heart disease as well as other serious conditions.

[Research by the CDC has found](#) that walking for an hour a day, five days a week, can cut the risk of a person experiencing a stroke in half. The aerobic activity of walking also strengthens the heart and gives a fantastic boost to our HDL levels ("good cholesterol") and lowers levels of LDL and triglyceride (the bad stuff).

The CDC also found that those who engage with cardiovascular exercise like hiking are half as likely to experience heart problems as people who don't exercise – those are some stats we can get behind!

Now that we have looked into the numerous physical benefits of hiking, it's time to focus on what hiking can do for the mind. So, let's move on to the wide-ranging mental benefits of hiking.

4. Makes you more creative

Hiking isn't just great for the body; it's also great for the mind – and soul. And this is one of the great things about this activity; there is so much more than just a single benefit of hiking.

Engaging in regular hiking can even make us more creative. Forgive us if that seems like rather a wishy-washy statement, and bear with us, as there's actually a fair amount of evidence to corroborate these claims.



It's not quite as simple as strapping on some boots, walking for 3 hours, and then composing a Concerto in time for tea – but hiking does actively boost how creative we are:

One of the biggest things that hinders our creative progress and mind power is our attention spans – in the modern world, we are beset upon by emails, texts, notifications and the bleeping, buzzing 'PAY ME ATTENTION' sounds of our mobile phones and other devices; all of which condition us into becoming easily distracted, and hindering our ability to focus for extended periods.

Research by **Ruth Ann Atchley and David L. Strayer** found that spending time outdoors increases our ability to focus, our attention spans, and our problem-solving skills by up to 50 percent. If ever there were a case for the mind-numbing impact of modern life, this was it, and this is possibly one of the most socially insightful and profound benefits of hiking.

Crucially, the researchers don't simply put this down to one thing, but the variety of benefits that venturing into the great outdoors can have. Hiking offers us the chance to get fresh air, plenty of vitamin D-boosting sunlight, along with getting us away from our electronic devices for hours at a time – something that we all-too-rarely get to experience.

Combine this with the fact that [Stanford University researchers](#) found that participants gave more creative responses to questions when walking on a treadmill than those sat in a chair.

5. It can help your body heal

While there's plenty of evidence to support the argument that hiking can help prevent all kinds of health problems, there's even some indication that it can help the body to recover after serious conditions such as cancer.

There are a lot of forces at play in conditions such as cancer, many of which we don't fully understand, but there's some evidence that indicates hiking might play a role in improving the antioxidative capacity in oncological patients.

If that all sounds a little too sciency, the essence of these findings is that among the many benefits of hiking may be the indication that the activity helps patients either suffering with cancer, or in recovery from treatment, fight off disease – and help the body in its work to reduce the progression, recurrence, and onset of cancer.

It's also important not to underestimate the psychological benefits it can provide, with many people living with cancer citing how much better hiking can make them feel, and how well it can fit into their recovery.

6. Improves overall mental health

It's hard to underestimate the psychological benefits of hiking. Simply getting out of the house, flat, or other indoor space you spend most of your time and enjoying the tranquility of nature and a stimulating fresh breeze can do wonders for the soul – and there's plenty of evidence that hiking can actively improve our overall mental health.

Conditions such as stress, anxiety, depression, and other mental health difficulties, are more prominent than ever – in fact, [mental health charity Mind notes](#) that in the UK, 1 in 4, yes, a quarter of the population, will experience a mental health problem every year.

It's not at all uncommon for us to struggle with conditions like depression – but new research has found that even a 90-minute walk in nature can have a dramatic effect on the brain, and the way we feel.

Research already exists that indicates how a walk outside can provide an uplifting boost to our mood, but new data collected by researchers at Stanford University, have found that the roots go much deeper than that.

They asked participants to fill in a rumination questionnaire (rumination is basically repetitive and usually negative self-reflection – and it's a key element of mental health problems such as depression and anxiety) and conducted a brain scan, before participants complete a walk in either an urban or an outdoor environment. They then asked participants to fill in the questionnaire again and took a comparative brain scan. Their findings? We'll give you one guess.

The participants who had taken the walk in a natural environment showed significant and consistent reductions in ruminative thought, both through the questionnaire responses, and their brain scan.

This suggests that hiking doesn't just perk you up a bit, it actually changes the way your brain works, and draws focus away from negative, repetitive thought. There's plenty more to be discovered, and these findings suggest that we've only just scratched the surface of the potential psychological benefits of hiking.

7. It helps you unplug

We spend a frankly astonishing amount of time 'plugged in'. A few statistics on how much time we spend in the digital world offer a stark and undisputable view into the modern world, and how prominent our screens are in our lives:

- The average (American) adult, [spends 4 hours a day](#) – or 86 hours a month – on their phones
- Children aged 8 and under spend 48 minutes a day in front of mobile screens alone – [up from 15 minutes](#) only 4 years ago
- If [trends remain the same](#), the average adult will spend a staggering **5 years and 4 months** of their life on social media.
- Our growing obsession with mobile phones and iPads has led to a [13 per cent drop](#) in time spent with friends over the last 15 years

We've not put these figures in to berate our readers (as we appreciate that as you're reading Roaming Spices, you're almost certainly using a screen right now...), or to try and make anyone feel bad – our new modern world of technology is a wonderful thing, and we can do things we once never dreamed about, with ease.

What is important, however, is to retain a sense of perspective. The statistics listed above are just a few examples of how our world is actively changing, and if we don't stay aware of the impact, we can lose sight of just how important it is to actively disconnect from time to time.

Enter hiking. It's a simple point, but in modern times, it's become one of the biggest benefits of hiking – it gives us a chance to unplug. A long hike is a physical reminder that the world we live in is beautiful, vast, and varied – and yes, it's still there even when we have our heads buried in the bottomless pit of content that is Twitter.

Making hiking a regular part of your routine is an absolutely fantastic way to deliberately pull your attention away from the digital world and reconnect with the things that really matter.

8. Hiking makes us happier

We'll caveat this point by the fact that everyone is different. The assertion that hiking makes us happier would probably be viciously refuted by the average 14-year-old, whose cries of 'But do we have to?!' will strike a resonating chord with any outdoorsy parents or relatives who have ever dared ask the kids to lace up their boots and help them pack a picnic.

With that said, it's worth noting that one of the best benefits of hiking is that it can actively contribute to increased feelings of happiness – particularly among those who struggle with depression, or low self-esteem. [One study found](#) that in the most extreme cases of high-risk suicide patients, mountain hiking led to a drastic decrease in feelings of hopelessness.

This may sound like a slightly backwards point, as this seems to suggest that hiking doesn't actually make you happy, it just makes you less sad (not quite the same thing). But happiness is a complicated thing – and the chance to share an afternoon with loved ones, out in the beauty of nature? Ok, maybe we're being self-centered, but it certainly makes us happy...

9. Hiking can be a great boost to our social lives

This one depends a lot on how you approach hiking, and the way it fits into your own routine and lifestyle, but there's a solid case to be made for the benefits of hiking on our social lives. One of the great things about hiking and walking as a hobby is that there are almost no restrictions on who can take part, and how they can go about it.

Granted, if you plan to soar up Mount Snowdon, you might want to prepare a bit first, and it might not be suitable for complete newcomers (see our account of our own [experience climbing Snowdon](#) for a few useful tips!) but generally speaking, hiking is an incredibly inclusive thing to try.



This means that as activities go, there are few better ways to enjoy the company of friends, loved ones, and even strangers, than by engaging in a hike together. What's the main way to pass the time during a long hike? Chat, about anything and everything that comes to mind. It's an inherently social

activity, and by inviting along those dear to you, it can give you a fantastic chance to spend some real, quality time together. What better way to embrace these social benefits of hiking!

It's also worth pointing out that, depending on where you live, there might even be a local hiking group you can join. Sites like [Meetup](#) provide a platform for like-minded strangers to share experiences, with the intention of making new friends, and enjoying something together as a way to bond.

It's always worth doing a little research to see if there's anything like this that you could take part in, as it could turn hiking from an excuse to drag the kids away from Call of Duty, to an opportunity to widen your network of friends. And even when it is just the kids – after an hour or so on the trail, even the most stoic of grumpy teens tend to soften up a bit. Particularly at the promise of a Kit Kat at the next stop!

Conclusions

Well, there you have it! 9 of the best benefits of hiking, all summarized and tied up neatly (or not, we make no promises – but hopefully, you get the gist!). The key takeaways from all of this isn't that hiking is the cure to this or that, or the perfect fix for one problem or another. It's much more than that.

Hiking is one of the most natural, fulfilling things we can do. It puts us back in touch with the world we inhabit, it gives us a chance to exercise, bond with loved ones, and just *breathe* a bit. All the evidence is there – it's not just hokum; hiking really does have tangible benefits.

[*https://roamingspices.com/benefits-of-hiking/](https://roamingspices.com/benefits-of-hiking/)