

Trail Medicine #16

Don't Get Hurt!

by David B. Tyler, M.D.

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When I was asked to write an article on hiking-related injuries, it seemed at first to be a simple task. However, after giving it some thought, it occurred to me that the most important issue in any endeavor, hiking or otherwise, is to avoid accidents and to be prepared for any conditions that may be encountered. After something bad happens it is too late, and in all likelihood our outing is ruined, or worse.

To be successful we have to come home safely, be reasonably comfortable, and have fun. Having fun is pretty much dependent on the first two. With these thoughts in mind I'll focus this piece on prevention and preparedness before discussing treatment in the next issue of *FLT News*. Most of the following information is pretty basic and well known to experienced hikers, but nonetheless bears repeating for many of us.

Probably more hiking injuries are caused by falls than from any other mishap. As I've grown older, I've become more and more careful to avoid falling. Whether climbing over slippery boulders on an Adirondack high peak or walking around Green Lakes, I have to remind myself continually to "watch where you are going!" Where we put our feet is the key, especially on hilly trails. We must beware of loose sticks or small stones that can slide out from under us. Wet leaves are a menace! There is not much, short of ice, that is slipperier than a wet tree root angled across a steep trail. When walking on boulder-strewn trails, be sure that the rocks you step on are solid and not apt to tip under your weight—an accident waiting to happen!

While looking at the ground, don't forget to be aware of blown-down trees or low-hanging branches crossing the trail. I try to look up the trail 50 feet or so to get an idea of what's ahead, then concentrate on the ground beneath my feet. It is easy to bump your head or injure an eye if you're not careful. Several times I've ended up with a big "goose egg" on my head from running into something overhead.



Be careful about pulling yourself up a slope by grabbing onto small branches or trees that are brittle or poorly rooted. A painful backward tumble down a steep hill could be the result if your handhold gives way.

My wife, a frequent hiking companion, may be the world's expert on the sprained ankle. She is always so interested in the flowers, birds, and trees surrounding us that she often fails to pay attention to where she is going. The result at

times has been a couple of months hobbling around in pain. With time and much painful experience, she has become more cognizant of the trail and spends less time looking about. I don't by any means intend to disparage the value of enjoying our surroundings, but it is better done while standing still than while in mid-stride.

My son recently proposed to his fiancée while on a hike. She said she walked all the way back to the car staring at her new ring. Fortunately she didn't fall. Another young woman, however, wasn't so lucky. Last summer on Mount Marcy she became engaged to be married and soon after was injured in a fall. She had to spend the night on the mountain and be evacuated by helicopter the next day. Could it be that, in her euphoria, she failed to look where she was going?

Constant vigilance is probably the most important element in avoiding falls, but there are at least two other considerations: good equipment and proper conditioning.

Getting equipped is not difficult or very expensive. Most important is the footwear. I prefer water-resistant, ankle-high boots with a good tread. In steep country, if ice is likely to be encountered, crampons are very helpful. I once saw a young man wearing sneakers literally sliding down a steep, icy part of the Blue Mountain Trail. He seemed to be fine, but I'm sure if I did that I'd have to be carried out after breaking one bone or another.

Hiking poles are a great asset, particularly when carrying a heavy pack. For most things, a sturdy stick

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would probably suffice, but the commercially available spring-loaded poles are more reliable. One pole is good, but in rough country two are better. I have avoided many spills by having a solidly planted hiking pole for support and balance. In steep areas we should have at least three of our four extremities in contact with the ground. Hiking poles make that possible because they become an extension of our arms.

Getting into hiking condition mostly requires going out and doing it. It would be foolish for most of us to attempt a long, strenuous hike over rough terrain without some practice. Training on a treadmill or walking on flat surfaces is not good enough. To do it right, one should approximate the conditions to be encountered. That is to say, it is best to walk on rough trails with elevation changes, carrying about the same weight you will be carrying on your planned trip. My routine has been to take several hikes locally, packing 30 to 40 pounds, during the few weeks preceding a larger excursion. This significantly improves strength and aerobic capacity and makes the “real” trip safer and more enjoyable.

Being comfortable when hiking is a relative term. Our feet hurt, our muscles ache, and bugs may be driving us crazy. We’re often hot and sweaty when walking, then cold and clammy when we stop to rest. These things are hard to avoid, but wearing the right clothing certainly helps. The number one rule is: don’t wear cotton, especially next to your skin. When cotton gets wet, it clings to your skin and dries very slowly. This is very uncomfortable and can lead to hypothermia in cold weather. There are excellent polyester fabrics which dry very quickly that are much more comfortable and safer than cotton. Wool-polyester

“Smart-Wool” socks are great to keep your feet dry and help to avoid blisters. Fleece works very well to wick moisture away from the skin, and wool somehow feels warm even when wet. It is wise to always have a waterproof windbreaker in your pack. In high country having a fleece or wool hat and gloves will help a lot when bad weather comes along. Despite wearing quick-drying clothing, I think it is a great idea to carry a spare dry undershirt and socks to change into when the strenuous activity is over. Hypothermia is insidious and dangerous. It subtly decreases our ability to make good decisions and to hike with due caution. Wearing wet clothing greatly increases the chances of it occurring.

Whenever possible (and usually it isn’t), it makes sense to wait for a nice day rather than struggle with bad and possibly dangerous weather. Always remember that weather conditions can suddenly change for the worse in high country, so be prepared.

Although I break this rule frequently, it is definitely unwise to hike into remote areas alone. If you do, be sure that someone knows your destination and expected time of return. I used to find it distasteful to carry a cellular phone into the woods, but under certain circumstances it could be a real lifesaver.

Be prepared to spend a night in the woods in case of an emergency. That means your pack should contain sufficient clothing to stay warm and dry, matches in a waterproof case, a ground cloth or space blanket, a flashlight, a length of rope, a first-aid kit, plenty of water, and extra food.

Hopefully, if we can get ourselves into shape, carry the right equipment, and watch where we’re going, we can avoid trouble, have some fun, and fully enjoy our time along the trail. □

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