

Walking - safety and environmental issues

Walking is a low impact activity that offers many health benefits. It's good for your heart, joints, muscles and bones. It's free, requires no training or special equipment, and is generally a safe way to exercise. However, there are safety and environmental issues to consider, especially if you choose to walk in parks or reserves that offer difficult terrain or long trails.

General safety suggestions

General suggestions on reducing the risk of injury while walking include:

- Wear appropriate footwear to reduce the risk of blisters or shin splints.
- Drink plenty of fluids before, during and after your walk.
- Wear sunglasses, sunscreen, a long-sleeved shirt and a hat to avoid sunburn.
- Choose a route that is appropriate for your age and fitness level. Warm up and cool down with a slow, gentle pace to ease in and out of your exercise session.
- See your doctor for a medical check-up before embarking on any new fitness program, particularly if you are aged over 40 years, are overweight or haven't exercised in a long time.

Don't overexert yourself

You don't have to push yourself to breathlessness to enjoy the health benefits of walking. Instead, walk briskly enough so that you can still carry on a conversation. You will need to increase the intensity of your walks as your cardiovascular fitness improves, by walking faster or choosing hillier terrain. You can give your upper body more of a workout by wearing weights strapped to your hands.

Bushwalking safety suggestions

You may increase your risk of injury (such as shin splints or hypothermia) if you underestimate the demands of a particular bushwalk. Suggestions include:

- Check with Parks Victoria as to which parks and reserves are appropriate for your age and fitness level.
- Generally, about six hours for a bushwalk (including rest breaks) is more than enough for the average person.
- Remember that walking can be hard work on a child's little legs. Approximately 1km per birthday is a good rule of thumb. For example, a four year old can be expected to walk up to 4km, with plenty of rest breaks.
- Always tell someone of your estimated time of return, so they can raise the alarm if you don't turn up.
- It is best to have at least three companions while bushwalking.
- Make sure you have maps of the area. Take note of all signage. Stay on the path.
- Check the weather forecast and take appropriate safety measures (for example, pack correct clothing and take sufficient quantities of drink and food).
- Look out for hazards in alpine or coastal areas, such as cliff edges or large waves.

Environmental considerations

While walking through Victorian parks and reserves, make sure you keep environmental damage to a minimum. Suggestions include:

- Stick to the paths. Wandering off the paths will damage vegetation, cause erosion and increase your chances of getting lost.
- If you plan to walk your dog in a park, check first to see if they are permitted. Many national and state parks and conservation reserves have dog restrictions.
- Most parks forbid domestic animals, firearms and chainsaws.
- A permit is required to remove rocks or plants from any park.
- Respect all native wildlife.

Fires may be lit only in fireplaces provided or as directed by signs. No fires at all may be lit on days of Total Fire Ban. Gas or fuel stoves have less environmental impact and are preferred. Fires are not permitted in some parks. If you would like more information about campfires, contact the Parks Victoria office nearest to the park where you plan to camp, visit www.cfa.vic.gov.au or www.dse.vic.gov.au or call the Victorian Bushfire Information Line on 1800 240 667.

Don't litter. Take all rubbish home with you.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Parks Victoria Information Centre Tel. 13 1963
- 'Go for your life' Infoline service Tel. 1300 739 899
- VICSRAPID Victorian Sport and Recreation Association for Intellectual Disability Tel. (03) 9639 3399
- Bushwalking Victoria Tel. (03) 9455 1876

Things to remember

- Check with Parks Victoria as to which reserves and parks are appropriate for your age and fitness level.
- Drink plenty of fluids before, during and after your walk.
- While walking through Victorian parks and reserves, make sure you keep environmental damage to a minimum.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

Parks Victoria

Copyright © 1999/2010 State of Victoria. Reproduced from the Better Health Channel (www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au) at no cost with permission of the Victorian Minister for Health. Unauthorised reproduction and other uses comprised in the copyright are prohibited without permission.

- This Better Health Channel fact sheet has passed through a rigorous approval process. For the latest updates and more information visit www.betterhealth.vic.gov.au.