

Health and fitness

Deirdre Sheehan

Health and fitness in the hills

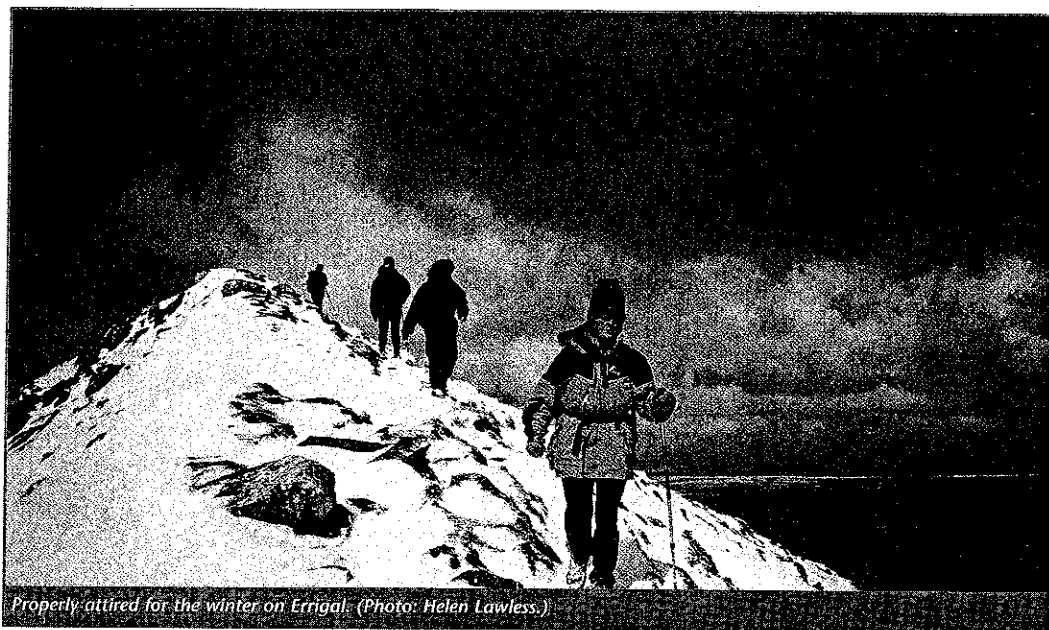
The walking season will be starting again soon and, in order to get the most enjoyment out of your days on the hills and with an eye to avoiding injury or aggravating existing weaknesses, Deirdre Sheehan MISCP discusses a few thoughts on health and fitness in the hills.

Gear

Wearing layers of clothes which, from inside out, take moisture away from your skin, trap warm air next to your body and protect you from wind and rain will help to maintain your body temperature in winter. Warm muscles are less likely to tear than cold muscles and will allow fluent movement of your joints as you move over varied terrain. This fluent controlled movement in turn protects ligaments and cartilages which improves your body's ability to absorb shocks.

A warm hat as well as a pair of gloves can also make a big difference as more than half of your body's heat loss is from an unprotected head. As your head and body get cold, less blood flows to your arms and legs. Your hat should be the first layer you take off when you're feeling overheated and the first layer you put on if you're starting to cool down.

Another key component in the gear stakes is your boots. High uppers protect the ankles in rough terrain, vibram soles provide good traction on slippery vegetation, mud and snow and good midsoles provide insulation and shock absorption. A minimum of seams decreases the number of places through which water may leak and reduces the potential for unwelcome friction at pressure



Properly attired for the winter on Errigal. (Photo: Helen Lawless.)

points. For example, boots with a vertical seam running up the back of the heel towards the Achilles tendon may cause blisters on your heels or irritate your tendon. Fortunately, most boots are now produced using a single piece of leather around the heel area which makes new boots a lot easier to break in. (Compeed or Second Skin are useful to have in your pack if you're trying out new boots on a hike — don't wait for the blister to appear before taking the time to stop and protect your skin.) If you're buying new boots, it's helpful to bring a pair of walking socks along with any orthotics or insoles you may normally use. Most people's feet swell during the day so consider buying your boots later in the day and spend a bit of time walking around the shop before making a decision to buy. Boots should be a good investment rather than instruments of torture, so take the time to find a make and style that suits your feet. Properly fitting boots should firmly anchor your heels in place while giving your toes room to wiggle. Your toes should not jam against the toebox

when you press forwards. Given the choice between boots that are slightly too big and those that are slightly too small, you're usually wiser to go with the slightly larger pair. The extra space may be filled with a thicker walking sock or by use of a thin inner sock. Walking socks with cushioning under the soles will help to reduce friction between your boot and your foot. Gaiters worn during winter conditions also help to keep your feet dry and warm and reduce friction. They should have a strap that goes under your boot if they're to work effectively.

Last but not least, a mention of backpacks. Your pack should allow you to carry weight close to your body and the adjustment range must be compatible with the length of your back. Although many of us are inclined to leave the hip straps open when we walk; this in fact is not such a good idea. Once the shoulder straps are adjusted so that the pack hugs your upper back, closed hip straps enable the weight of the pack to rest on and be carried by the bone structure of your hips rather than by the continual and tiring use of

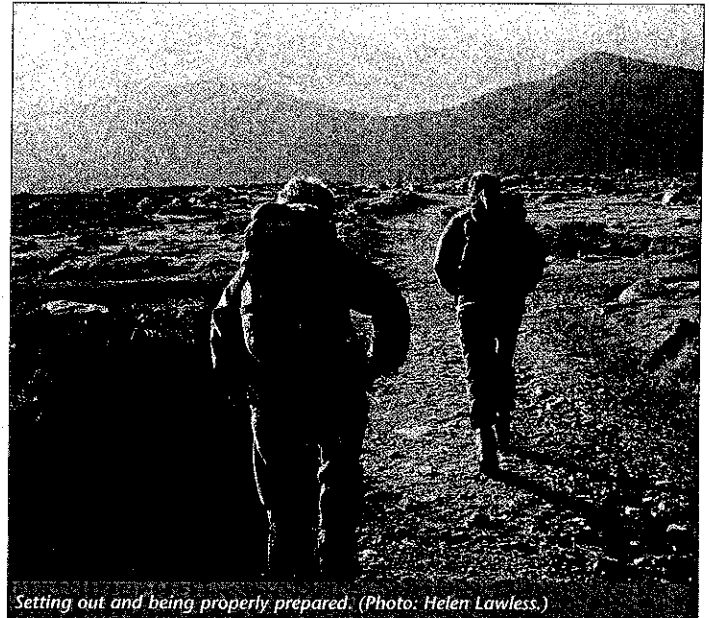
the muscles of your back. Use of the horizontal strap across your chest to prevent the pack from shifting is usually only required when going over difficult terrain where delicate balance is a priority.

Food and fluids

Have a good meal before you go out for the day. This should include enough liquids to ensure that you are well hydrated when you set off for your walk. Remember that by the time you start to feel thirsty you are already dehydrated. Continue to take in fluids during the day and make sure to bring enough food to meet your energy needs. Insufficient food and fluid can lead to a drop in body temperature, fatigued muscles and may affect your decision making skills, all of which can contribute to accident and injury. It is wise to carry food and fluids above and beyond your basic needs, so that in the unlikely event of your still being on the hills when others are safely home you have spare rations to help keep you safe and well.



Checking the route. (Photo: Helen Lawless.)



Setting out and being properly prepared. (Photo: Helen Lawless.)

Pace and technique

To walk efficiently in the hills, you need to take into account the varied terrain, the weight of your pack and your level of fitness. Each of us has our own natural walking pace, which is affected but not wholly decided by our level of fitness. Situations may arise which require us to adapt our pace to that of someone else but the ideal pace for you is one that you can sustain hour after hour. Before starting a walk, it is sometimes suggested that going through a stretching routine will protect you from straining muscles. In truth, most people step out of a car just prior to heading onto the hills. At this point joints may be a little stiff and muscles cold. Cold muscles don't stretch well. Instead, walk slowly at the start letting your body become aware of the demands to come. As you feel yourself warming up increase your pace. A more rapid heart rate, increased blood flow to your muscles and lubrication of your joints will allow your body to safely respond to the

increased effort. Vary your pace depending on the terrain. Move steadily and methodically up steep hills and, as the grade lessens, pick up the tempo. There is often a temptation to head uphill in a straight line. The steeper the incline the greater the strain on your calf muscles and Achilles tendons. A methodical zigzag technique allows you to gain height whilst minimising the strain on those muscles and tendons.

Walking downhill is generally a more attractive proposition than walking uphill but requires similar care if you intend walking with comfort into your senior years. On descents, your body weight drops abruptly on to your hips, knees and feet. The impact can be felt not only in the joints of your legs but also in your lower back. Again, the steeper the slope the greater the effects, with unpleasant results including blackened nails, blisters, cartilage damage and back pain. Keeping your toenails trimmed during your walking season and ensuring that your laces are tight enough

to reduce movement inside your boots on descents, helps to look after your feet. Maintaining a measured pace, using a zigzag technique on steep ground, placing your feet lightly and bending your knees with each step to cushion the shock, will all help to protect your joints.

Over the past few years, the use of ski poles has become increasingly popular amongst walkers as they help to reduce the impact experienced by the joints of your legs and your spine and can also prove very helpful when crossing streams. If you use only one pole, transferring it from one side of your body to the other will help to distribute the stresses evenly. If used on steep terrain, this will be complemented by the use of a zigzag walking technique. Shortening ski poles on ascents and lengthening them on descents keeps your spine in good alignment and optimises their ability to reduce impact on your joints. Their cumulative effect on the land is a discussion that is at present in its infancy.

Homeward bound

Safely off the hills, there is often a pit stop on the way home. A change of clothes and shoes will ensure that you're warm and dry for the duration. Remember that alcohol does not aid the rehydration process so don't postpone the well-earned hot shower/bath for too long, particularly if you know that you've asked a lot of your body during the day or you're unaccustomed to the level of exercise that you've taken. Stretching out aching muscles after a shower or bath will reduce the level of stiffness experienced the next day. If you are aware that your body's general level of flexibility and fitness could be improved upon, development of a flexibility programme or yoga routine along with a good overall level of fitness will improve your body's ability to deal with the demands you place on it when out walking, leaving you with more time and energy to simply enjoy your day.