

Walking - safety and environmental issues

Walking is a low impact activity that offers substantial 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:

- See your doctor for a medical checkup 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.
- Remember to warm up and cool down to reduce the risk of injuries.
- Wear sunglasses, sunscreen, a long-sleeved shirt and a hat to avoid sunburn.
- Carry a walking stick or umbrella to fend off unfriendly (and unleashed) dogs.
- Wear appropriate footwear to reduce the risk of blisters or shin splints.
- Drink plenty of fluids before, during and after your walk.

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 bush walk. Suggestions include:

- Check with Parks Victoria as to which reserves and parks are appropriate for your age and fitness level.
- Generally, about six hours for a bush walk (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. Let them know when you return, too.
- It is best to have at least three companions while bushwalking. This means that one person can look after someone with an injury, while the others go for help.
- Make sure you have maps of the area. Take note of warning and advisory signs. Stay on the path.
- Check the weather forecast and take appropriate safety measures (for example, pack correct clothing and take enough drink and food to last).
- 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 in a park, check first to see if dogs are permitted. Most national and state parks and other conservation reserves are 'dog-free' zones.
- Most state and national parks forbid domestic animals, firearms and chainsaws.

- Don't pick flowers, take souvenirs (such as rocks or plants) or interfere with any animals.
- Some parks don't allow fires, while others provide clearly signed fireplaces or gas or electric BBQs. Observe and obey any regulations. Preferably use a gas or fuel stove to minimise impacts on the environment. Don't light any fires at all on a Total Fire Ban day.
- Don't litter. Take all rubbish home with you.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Parks Victoria Information Centre Tel. 131 963
- VicWalk Federation of Victorian Walking Clubs Tel. (03) 9455 1876
- 'Go for your life' Infoline service Tel. 1300 739 899
- VICSRAPID Victorian Sport and Recreation Association for Intellectual Disability website or Tel. (03) 9639 3399
- Victorian Walking Clubs website

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.

Want to know more?

For references, related links and support group information, go to More information.

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

Parks Victoria

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