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More hiking, less injury

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An abundance of trails are open for hiking season in the Upper Valley, inviting residents and visitors to enjoy the serenity and beauty of the area. Hiking is a terrific way to spend a day with friends or family, take in new scenery, breathe fresh air, and get a great functional workout.

Like most physical activities, hiking requires some preparation so people can enjoy the benefits, without a nagging injury taking away from the experience. Here are a few exercises and stretches to help hikers maintain the strength, flexibility and aerobic conditioning they need to explore new trails injury-free this summer.

Strength

Hip, core and ankle strength are especially important to prepare for hiking and backpacking, as these are the primary muscles we use. Below are a few key exercises that build strength and stability for this muscle group:

Side Lying Hip Abduction

Setup: Begin by lying on your side.

Movement: Slowly lift your upper leg towards the ceiling then lower it back to the starting position.

Tip: Make sure to keep your knee straight and do not let your hips roll backward or forward during the exercise.

Plank

Setup: Begin on all fours.

Movement: Straighten your legs, moving your body into a plank position, with your feet together and your elbows directly underneath your shoulders. Hold this position.

Tip: Make sure to keep your back straight and look straight down between your hands during the exercise.

Chair Squats

Setup: Begin in a standing upright position in front of a chair.

Movement: Lower yourself into a squatting position so you lightly touch the chair, then repeat.

Tip: Make sure to maintain your balance during the exercise and do not let your knees bend forward past your toes.

Flexibility

Avoid muscle cramps and strains by stretching the ankles, hips and quads. Maintaining flexibility in these muscles will help hikers feel more loose and agile. These stretching exercises should be done at least 3 times a week -- before, during or after hiking.

Calf stretch

Setup: Begin standing in front of a table or wall.

Movement: Place your hands on the table and step back with one leg, keeping your back knee straight, heel on the ground, and toes pointing forward.

Tip: Do not let your heel come off the ground or your toes turn in or out.

Modified Runner's Lunge

Setup: Begin in a half kneeling position with one knee bent in front of your body.

Movement: Tighten your abdominals, tilt your pelvis backward, and gently push your hips forward. You should feel a stretch in the front of your hip.

Tip: Make sure to keep your hips facing forward and back straight during the exercise.

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Open Book Stretch

Setup: Begin lying on your side with both legs bent at 90- degree angle, and your arms together straight in front of you on the ground.

Movement: Slowly move your top arm away from your other arm, toward the floor on your other side, rotating your trunk at the same time. Try to touch your shoulder blade to the floor while keeping your hips facing straight forward. Bring your arm back and repeat.

Tip: Make sure to keep your knees together as you rotate.

Aerobic Conditioning

A variety of exercises can prepare you for hiking and backpacking season. The most important aspect of any good conditioning program is setting an aerobic base.

Working on an aerobic base will vary greatly depending on the type and intensity of hiking/backpacking you would like to do. In general, a good starting point is walking 20 minutes 4-6x per week. A good rule of thumb to increase your aerobic fitness is increasing your walking time by 5 minutes a week until building up to an approximate desired hiking time. Hills and speed-walking can help you progress your fitness.

Also, consider using a walking stick or hiking poles for steep descents if you have knee discomfort, as this will aid balance stability and assist in “controlling” your descent down a hill. Effective downward pressure from your foot and ankle can also relieve knee stress when descending grades. Physical therapists have the knowledge and skills to diagnose movement problems that can cause knee or other sources of muscle and joint pain. Consider seeking help from a physical therapist if you have chronic or new onset pain with activity.