

Peak performance: Elevate your hiking IQ

OSF HealthCare Newsroom

Matt Sheehan – Media Relations Coordinator

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Whether you're an avid hiker or just enjoying the fresh breeze on a fall walk, preparing for your journey is key.

Karan Rai, MD, who specializes in sports medicine at OSF HealthCare, offers these tips to make your hike safer this season, no matter your hiking experience level.

Map out your adventure:

"First things first, try to get a map of the trail you're going to take, and account for how much time it will take to get there and get back. Usually, adding an extra 10% gives you sufficient time," Dr. Rai says.

"Always try to inform somebody of where you're going and what your projected time back will be."

Dr. Rai says this is extremely important, especially because hiking trails are known to not have the best cellphone service.

"Take a look at the weather. As the seasons change, sometimes we might be due for some rain or cooler conditions," Dr. Rai adds.

Bring a first-aid kit:

"When going hiking, regardless of duration, have a basic first-aid kit on-hand with supplies such as Band-Aids, gauze and antiseptic," says Dr. Rai.

He says bringing a multipurpose tool can prove helpful, too. Some of the gadgets inside of it can be a knife, or an eyeglass repair kit in case your glasses break.

Proper footwear and hiking poles:

"We can underestimate how strenuous some of these hikes can be, so making sure you brought a great pair of shoes is a readily available trick everybody should utilize," Dr. Rai says.

Dr. Rai adds hiking poles can help hikers of all skill levels on all different kinds of terrain.

"They can help take the load off your knees. They add a bit of a different stress, because they force you to utilize your upper body and core muscles. So, it makes it more of a full-body exercise."

Watch your back:

“Look ahead of you and look down to make sure you’re walking on the trail, but also take a look backwards. Trails can appear different while you’re making that return route,” Dr. Rai says.

Stay on the trail:

The chance of getting hurt increases if you choose to get off the hiking trail. Dr. Rai recommends paying attention to signs during your hike and following the mapped-out trail.

“As much as you might want to get that perfect picture of the waterfall, try to stick to the marked trails,” Dr. Rai says. “In general, when you’re going off trail, that increases your chance of injury. Whether that’s stepping into an unmarked hole or running into some wildlife, those are some of the common pitfalls. Depending how far you go off the trail, it’s a lot harder to have people find you if you are unable to get back to the trail.”

Hydrate, hydrate, hydrate!

A lack of food and water can cause a fun hike to go downhill very quickly. Sandwiches and protein bars can easily be stored in a pack while hiking, but Dr. Rai says make sure you bring enough water to keep you fully hydrated.

“Depending on the duration of your hike, it varies based on how intense it is. But generally, packing at least 1 liter of water per hour for a beginner’s hike. Then as the intensity level increases, add a half-liter per hour,” Dr. Rai says.

Most trails will have a rating or intensity level assigned to them if you look them up online. There are multiple apps available to download on cellphones to take a look at your trail before you venture out.

Common injuries while hiking:

No matter the difficulty of your hike, injuries can happen.

“Commonly we’ll see ankle sprains or knee contusions,” Dr. Rai says. “That can be from falling or stumbling while hiking.”

But some injuries happen without falling on, or off, the trail.

“Other times people can get rashes or sunburns. This goes back to not accounting for some weather-related changes,” Dr. Rai adds.

Health emergencies can happen:

While more serious health emergencies are rare, they’re still possible, and it’s important to be prepared.

“The toughest part is knowing what to do in those situations. Understand what CPR entails, and know how to do chest compressions,” Dr. Rai urges. “Also have a good way of contacting someone for help. Whether that’s being in an area with cell service or even having a whistle handy. Oftentimes that sound

carries further than our voices, it also helps preserve our energy during a more life-threatening or severe situation.”

While it may seem like there are many tips to keep in mind while hiking, Dr. Rai says it’s a great form of cardiovascular exercise and a fun experience for the family. If you’re new to hiking, he recommends telling your health care provider that you are starting to hike and see if they offer any further guidance.