



Some 15 years ago I tentatively bought my first pair of walking poles, worried that I was simply following the newest trend. But when using them I felt good, walking seemed easier. There appeared to be less stress on my battered knees, even downhill with a pack on my back, and my upper body was now playing a part in ascent and descent.

One trip during a sudden rainstorm, I put my poles down on a nearby spinifex bush while I got my rain jacket out of my pack. I then stood up and set off for the nearby cars, we were at the end of a weekend walk and just wanted to escape this weather.

Some 10 minutes later, huddled in my jacket, I realised - NO POLES! Returning to the area all the spinifex looked the same, the poles eluded my search. I had lost them!

This is when I realised how attached I had become to my hiking poles. I returned to the area for further walks, on all occasions failing to find the poles. Seems some kangaroo had snaffled them for their own purpose. The country we were walking in was rough - lots of steep ascents and descents.

The result: badly swollen knees, and the need for numerous physio visits.



Think of walking poles as an extra set of legs, or extensions of your arms.

Upgrading to a Versatile Model

I replaced the missing poles with a set of Leki poles, which were fantastic and served me for many years. Eventually, after using them for some time with a broken shock spring, I decided to either replace or repair them.

Parts are available, but I took a chance to buy new a pair of Black Diamond poles with a simple 'flick-lock' mechanism. Collapsed, these poles are shorter than my old ones, so they easily fit in luggage and pack well for travel.



On a recent sodden walk in the Flinders Ranges, the versatility of hiking poles was really highlighted. I used them to help in going up and down steep and variable terrain, and walked effortlessly on slippery clay tracks in comparison to those walking without poles.

Where others joined hand-in-hand to ford running creeks, I was able to support myself and cross safely. That said, you should always err on the side of caution; when fording, linking up with friends is a safer bet.

The Importance and Benefits of Hiking Poles

Now I know that walking poles are not just an equipment trend, they are - in fact - the reason that I can continue bushwalking.

1. Reducing Impact

Hiking poles reduce the impact on your legs, knees, ankles, and feet, especially when descending steep slopes - providing vital support for ageing joints and recovering sports injuries. They can bear about 5kg of your load when walking on a level ground and 8kg when on an incline, reducing the compressive force on the knees by 25-40%.

2. Assisting on Difficult Terrain

For slippery terrains such as loose gravel and iced-over snow and slush, hiking poles are a must.

The additional points of contact with the ground improve balance over trickier terrain such as loose, rocky inclines, tree root infested trails, water crossings, and mud.

3. Increasing Speed and Exercise Intensity

Not only does walking increase blood circulation - which reduces the risk of heart problems - but by using hiking poles, you gain between 20 to 45% more oxygen uptake. This provides more energy to see and do more in your day.

Normally when we walk, we only use about 35% of our muscles. The arm movement that is associated with hiking poles helps to engage up to 90% of your body muscles. This means your upper body muscles are strengthened and toned, more calories are burned, and your blood circulation is increased - without the strain you would normally feel without poles.

Hiking poles are great for people who seek health and fitness results, but struggle with high-impact exercise like aerobics. This is because they give you all the benefits of high impact training, regardless of current levels of health and fitness and without an increase in perceived effort.

Poles also help hikers and trekkers to develop and maintain a consistent rhythm, which will increase your speed when traversing flat ground such as mud flats and button grass plains. They can also push back vegetation encroaching the trail and probe the depth of puddles and bogs, so your legs don't have to.



4. Use for Other Outdoor Activities

Amazingly, hiking poles can also be used as tent pegs! Some tents and tarps have rings that are the right size to fit the tip of the hiking pole. This is great for building emergency shelters. Some hiking poles also have a built-in mount for your camera. With a bit of creativity, you can turn yours into one too!

Use them too as a fire prodder, drying rack, tent supporter... you name it! For a wide range of uses, check out pro hiker Fraser's take on the [Secret Uses of Walking Poles](#). Granted, some are a little tongue-in-cheek (or rather, 'pole-up-nose', as you'll see...).



Perhaps a bit of an overkill for the stairs up to the mezzanine in the Snowys store – but you'll often see people using a Leki in lieu of a boring-looking walking stick!

Features of a Good Pair of Hiking Poles

The main considerations when choosing [hiking poles](#) are the quality of the materials, grip comfort, straps, tip material, and the method of adjusting the pole length.

1. Materials

[Aluminium poles](#), while a little cheaper, are slightly heavier than [carbon](#). That said, they can take more of a beating, so may be preferable for harder, multi-day treks. Being lighter, carbon is perfect for day walks in the hills or when weight is at a premium.



2. Comfortable, Ergonomic Grips

...that don't cause blisters!

The three main choices are rubber, foam, and cork. Cork moulds to your grip for more comfort. Avoid cheap foam, which can be identified by its low density – just give them a squeeze.

3. Simple Hand Loops

Hand loops keep the poles in your hands, so you don't drop them while scrambling up the steeper sections. When concentrating on a climb, it's easy to drop your poles... and a huge pain to climb back down to get them!

Newest trend or not, I'm an advocate for hiking poles and the benefits they bring to hiking. [Check out the range of Hiking Poles at Snowys here.](#)

Do you hike with poles? If so, what are the main benefits you get out of them?