



walking / hiking



'Walking buses' can pick children up along the way, and all walk to school safely together.

what is it?

Walking is an enjoyable leisure activity that's great for getting you moving and bringing you into contact with nature. It's also the most natural form of transportation and one we're perfectly designed to do (as opposed to sitting down all day).

Many footpaths follow ancient routes connecting towns and villages, often used to take goods or livestock to market. For centuries, 'commoners' roamed freely across large areas of the country to graze animals or gather firewood. However, when common land was enclosed (largely between 1700 and the mid-1800s) many paths were preserved, but people lost their rights of access to much of the countryside (and with it their means of eking out a living). Walking as a leisure activity became popular in the 19th century, around the time people were leaving the countryside to work in the newly-industrialised cities. The Romantic Movement idealised the beauty of wild nature, and enshrined the concept of an idyllic country walk in the literature of the day - a way of escaping the pollution and stress of the inner city. Ironically though, access was then more restricted than at any other time in British history.

In 1932, ramblers from Manchester and Sheffield participated in an organised trespass on Kinder Scout, a high moorland plateau in the Peak District. Violent clashes with gamekeepers charged with keeping them off the land resulted in a number of arrests, but subsequent, larger trespasses helped turn public opinion in their favour. The Ramblers Association was formed three years later, and in 1949, the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act comprehensively mapped and safeguarded public rights of way, and in 2000 the Countryside and Rights of Way Act finally restored the 'right to roam' on all land classified as 'mountain, moor, heath, or down'.

Today, many thousands of miles of footpaths criss-cross Britain. Many take in historic sites, like Hadrian's Wall Path that runs from coast to coast across the north of England. Walking is Britain's most popular outdoor activity, enjoyed by some 9.1 million adults in England alone. Walking is also popular in the US, where trails tend to cross national parks rather than private land, and in Europe, where a network of short- and long-distance routes spans the continent.

While walking for pleasure is in robust health, in our daily lives it's a different story. UK charity Living Streets estimates a 30% decrease in the number of walking trips per person per year since 1995, and the 2014 National Travel Survey revealed that one in five people hadn't walked for 20 minutes at all in the last year!

what are the benefits?

Physical inactivity accounts for one in six deaths in the UK and costs the NHS up to £10 billion a year. Young people are now seriously at risk from obesity and it's estimated that only one fifth of 5-15 year olds are achieving the recommended levels of physical activity. Daily walking is an easy way for adults to hit the recommended target of 150 minutes of activity a week; for the elderly or those recovering from injury, it's a great way to maintain or return to fitness, as it places very little strain on the body - unlike high-impact sports like running. Just 25 minutes walking a day can increase your life expectancy by an average of seven years and halve your chances of having a heart attack. Walking can also help prevent type 2 diabetes, stroke and certain cancers, and regular brisk walks are better for controlling your weight than hitting the gym. Twenty minutes on a flat, even surface helps burn around 100 calories (the same as 10 minutes swimming, 12 minutes football or 16 minutes aerobics).



Walking in the countryside allows us to relax in green spaces and to connect with nature.



A 2014 study showed that people who walk or cycle to work instead of driving benefited from improved well-being and concentration, and suffered less from stress. Walking in a group is a sociable activity and a way to meet people, and hiking in the country allows us to spend time in relaxing green spaces and to connect with nature. Improving pedestrians areas has a positive impact on local economies. People tend to spend more in town centres and high streets that are nice to walk around (of course, from a low-impact perspective, we'd urge you to use local businesses rather than multinationals that extract money from your community). Exploring your neighbourhood on foot makes you feel more part of things, and you're more likely to stop and talk to neighbours than if you're in a car. Making it easier for the elderly or other less able sections of society to walk the streets can reduce feelings of isolation, so groups like Living Streets try to tackle problems such as pavement parking, uneven paving slabs, potholes etc. to make the streets safer for everyone.

Driving causes pollution, and damages nature to some extent. There's no getting away from it, so walking instead of driving whenever possible is a good thing. Long-term exposure to air pollution, mostly from vehicles, is estimated to cause 29,000 premature deaths each year in the UK. If everyone swapped one car journey a week for walking, traffic levels would reduce by at least 10%. One in five cars on the road during rush hour is on the school run, so the Walk to School campaign encourages walking all or part of the way. Walking to school means healthier children, less pollution and less congestion.



Walking to work helps reduce congestion and pollution, keeps you fit and saves you money.

what can I do?

Walking is free and requires no special preparation or equipment other than a good pair of shoes, and it's an easy activity to fit into everyday life. All walking is beneficial for health, but brisk is best; you should be warm and a little out of breath, but not struggling. If your level of fitness is low, start slowly and build up to longer distances. You can use a pedometer to keep track of how active you are, and to set daily goals to work towards. Or you could sign up initiatives like Walking for Health, or 'Try20' (minutes walking a day), or join a local walking group (there's even a Ramblers chapter for inner London, and the Thames path is the most walked in Britain). Urban walking is a very safe activity but there are factors that can make people feel less than comfortable on urban streets. Groups like Living Streets campaign on issues like zebra crossings, 20 mph zones, pedestrian areas, pavement parking and drink driving to improve safety.

If you're hiking in the countryside, a good map or route description is essential, as is appropriate clothing such as walking boots and rain-gear. A compass can also be useful. You can pick up everything you need at a good outdoors shop or online. There are hundreds of routes and guidebooks available free or for sale, and Ramblers Routes offers an online library of Britain's best walks. Again, hiking is generally a safe activity but a little common sense goes a long way: make sure you have enough food and water and have checked the weather forecast and transport timetables, and if you're going off alone let someone know where you're going and when you expect to be back.

resources

- lowimpact.org/walking-hiking: info, courses, links, books, including:
- Rebecca Solnit, *Wanderlust: a history of walking*
- Bill Birkett, *the Hillwalker's Manual*
- Angela Sydenham, *Public Rights of Way*
- livingstreets.org.uk: promoting safe streets
- ramblers.org.uk: advice, library of routes
- oss.org.uk: promoting public rights of way
- carfreewalks.org: walks accessible by public transport
- walking-routes.co.uk: thousands of walks

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