

## 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.

See over

## 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 73 98 99
- Website: [www.goforyourlife.vic.gov.au](http://www.goforyourlife.vic.gov.au)
- VICSRAPID Victorian Sport and Recreation Association for Intellectual Disability Tel. (03) 9696 7907
- Victorian Walking Clubs website <http://home.vicnet.net.au/~vicwalk/clubs.html>

## 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.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by, the Parks Victoria. The Better Health Channel is part of the Department of Human Services, Victoria

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