

4 Smart Ways to Take a Hike

Walking through beautiful surroundings is good for the body, mind, and spirit. Taking a hike in any of Montana's fifty-six counties is a wonderful way to get the physical activity your body needs, along with the connection to nature that all humans seem to crave. Getting kids into the hiking habit early can help to prepare them for many of life's challenges - both physical and mental. To avoid the agony of constant "are-we-there-yet" questions, keep children occupied with learning to observe their natural environment - by taking photographs or identifying plants, animals, insects, and/or birds. The secret to fun family hikes is plenty of well-timed breaks for rest, fluids, and food.

Walk smart with the right shoes and socks.

Happy feet are essential for happy hiking, especially for children. If you want children to grow up with a love of hiking, they need well-fitting shoes and breathable socks. Sturdy sneakers (with firm soles) may be fine for in-town walks and shorter hikes. However, boots or trail shoes with good ankle support are essential for longer hikes or rough paths. To avoid painful problems on a hike, try out shoes or boots (especially new ones) around the house before you hit the trail.

Be sun smart with lotions, clothes, hats, and glasses.

Smart sun protection is all about layers. The first layer is a broad-spectrum sunscreen with an SPF of 15 or higher. Cover all skin that may be exposed with plenty of sunscreen (reapply every 2 hours and after swimming). The next layer is loose-fitting clothing over as much of your body as is comfortable. The final is a wide brimmed hat and sunglasses that block 99-100% of UVA/UVB rays (check label). For more on sun-wise habits, visit www.epa.gov/sunwise/kids.html

Enjoy plenty of smart beverages.

Staying hydrated is one of the keys to enjoying any physical activity. Getting enough to drink will help your endurance and maintain a positive attitude. Refreshing water - brought from home or safely filtered from a stream - is your smartest bet. Sports drinks or powdered lemonade may be nice for those who won't drink enough plain water. A good rule of thumb is 1 quart every 2 hours for adults - more if you are in extreme hot, cold, or dry weather, or at higher altitudes.

Bring along smart trail foods.

Eating right on the trail means having plenty of easy-to-eat, high-energy snacks to carry your body throughout the hike. Make sure that your trail treats are foods that travel well and that your hikers really enjoy. Eating too little can lead to dizziness, nausea, and cramps. Some favorite food tips from veteran hikers: **tuna** (pop-top cans or pouches) on bagels or crackers; **cheese** (hard cheddar or string) with whole wheat crackers; **nuts** and dried fruit; and **beef jerky**.

LOOKING FOR FUN HIKES IN MONTANA? Big Sky country's official travel site lists hikes by region and city at www.visitmt.com/tripplanner/thingstodo/hiking.htm. The site offers detailed descriptions and printable maps of selected hikes. It also describes ten essential survival items, so you'll have what you need in tough outdoor situations. As the Scouts' motto reminds us, the best way to have a great hiking experience is to always **be prepared** for the worst.

Real Montana. Real Close. Real Fun.