

## **Advice for Hikers and Hunters: Long, Vigorous Hikes Take Toll on Feet, Ankles**

As brightly colored leaves dazzle the fall landscape, hikers and hunters nationwide will migrate to mountains, woods and fields, but many, unfortunately, are ill prepared for the beating their feet will take.

Hikers, hunters and others who love the outdoors often don't realize how strenuous it can be to withstand constant, vigorous walking on uneven terrain. Lax physical conditioning and inappropriate footwear bring scores of outdoor enthusiasts into our offices each fall for treatment of foot and ankle problems such as chronic heel pain, ankle sprains, Achilles tendonitis, fungal infections and severe blisters.

Walking up and down steep hillsides and tramping through wet, slippery fields and wooded areas puts stress on the muscles and tendons in the feet and ankles, especially if you haven't conditioned properly before hitting the trail. Also, many don't realize that cross-training athletic shoes aren't the best choice for extended hiking and hunting. In many cases supportive, sturdy, well constructed hiking boots can go along way in preventing sprained ankles or strained Achilles tendons, and sore arches.

Hikers and hunters need to make the investment in a top-quality hiking boot. Strong, well insulated and moisture-proof boots with steel or graphite shanks offer excellent ankle and foot support that helps lessen stress and muscle fatigue to reduce injury risk. The supportive shank decreases strain on the arch by allowing the boot to distribute impact as the foot moves forward. So if a boot bends in the middle, don't buy it.

Furthermore, depending on the type of foot you may have, insoles in addition to a good hiking boot can make a huge difference in how you feel at the end of the day. Having your feet examined by a professional fitter or a foot and ankle specialist can guide you in what type of insole you need to prevent excess strain and over exertion.

In wet and cold weather, wearing the right socks can help prevent blisters, fungal infections and frostbite. I will often recommend synthetic socks as the first layer to keep the feet dry and reduce blister-causing friction. For the second layer, wool socks add warmth, absorb moisture away from the skin, and help make the hiking boot more comfortable. Wool lets moisture evaporate more readily than cotton, so fewer blisters develop.

What happens if your feet or ankles hurt during a hike or hunt? Pain usually occurs from overuse or inappropriate support, even from just walking. If you're not accustomed to walking on sloped or uneven ground, your legs and feet will get tired and cause muscles and tendons to ache. To avoid a serious injury, such as a severe ankle sprain or an Achilles tendon rupture, rest for awhile if you start hurting and look for a better shoe.

Pain is a warning sign that something is wrong, so never ignore it. Serious injury risk escalates significantly if you continue hiking in pain. Hiking is a lot like skiing in that beginners should take on less difficult trails until they become better conditioned and more confident.

Needless to say, if the if your foot or ankle pain persists following a hike or a hunting outing see a foot and ankle specialist to prevent the condition from worsening. Be aware that ignoring worsening ankle instability or pain in the Achilles tendons can lead to a serious injury that will keep you off the trails for a long time.

Need some advise in order to choose the right boot and insole for your foot? Ask one of the trained fitting specialists at Cumberland Foot Health Solutions, or one of the physicians at Cumberland Foot and Ankle Center.