

Four Legs Are Better Than Two: Trekking Poles for Hiking and Backpacking

Trekking poles are multi-use tools that make great companions on any hike. They give the hiker or backpacker four points of contact with the ground, rather than just two. These additional legs improve stability and distribute weight and impact away from the hiker's knees, ankles, feet and back. They also promote upright posture for better breathing, incorporate the upper body in hiking, climbing and descending, and help put rhythm in your walk.

Trekking poles come in handy in other ways, too. They support lightweight backpacking tents and tarps, test the depth of mud puddles, find stepping stones in murky water, and stabilize a hiker on a log or stream crossing. They can clear a trail of spider webs for the first hiker of the day. In snake country they can safely detect venomous snakes on the far sides of large logs or rocks. And poles can push tall brush away from the trail as hikers pass through.

On the John Muir Trail in California, my hiking partners and I piled trekking poles on top of our bear canisters as a midnight alarm in case our food was approached by notorious Yosemite Valley bears. And trekking poles can even be used in first aid, such as a splint for a broken leg.

But it can be hard to wade through the many options among poles on the market. Here are some features to look for.

Grip

This is arguably the most important feature, since you will be holding grips for your entire hike. Options are the material of the grip and its angle, which determines your grip position. Grip material can be cork or foam. Cork is more expensive but sturdier. A model with an ergonomic grip (a 15-degree angle) is best for wrist health, and straps keep poles in your hands. Models with an ergonomic cork grip include the Leki Cressida (\$160, www.leki.com) and Black Diamond Trail

Ergo Cork (\$120, www.blackdiamond-equipment.com).

Adjustability

Some trekking poles come in different size ranges, and most are adjustable within their size range. Adjustability enables the pole length to match the hiker's height so elbows are at roughly a 90-degree angle while hiking. Hikers can lengthen adjustable poles for steep descents, or shorten them for climbing. Leki, Black Diamond Equipment, MSR (www.cascadedesigns.com/msr), and other manufacturers offer numerous adjustable models. Some hikers may prefer poles that also telescope to a short length for stowing during travel or while hiking on steep hand-over-foot terrain. Such models include the Black Diamond Distance FL (\$130) and MSR Swift 2 (\$120).

Locking Mechanism

Adjustable poles have internal or external locking systems to fix length. Internal mechanisms, which are stronger, rely on turning the bottom section of a pole clockwise or counter clockwise to tighten or loosen the lock. Models include the Leki Shasta (\$100) and Mountainsmith Pyrite (\$50, www.mountain-smith.com).

External systems provide visual confirmation that the pole is locked. One type uses a lever that flips closed or open to lock or unlock the pole; an example is the Black Diamond Countour Elliptic (\$150). Another external lock is a peg-and-hole system, used on the MSR Swift (\$130).

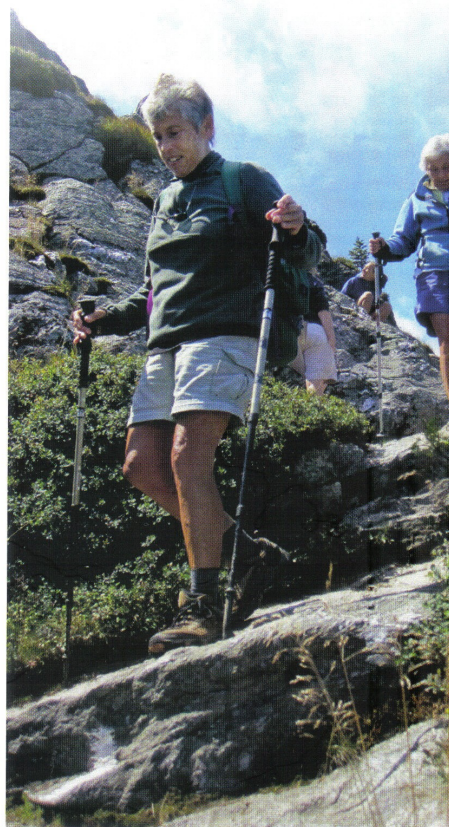
Grip, adjustability, and locking mechanism are just a few points to consider when selecting a pole. Many other options are simply a matter of personal preference. For example, poles may be aluminum, titanium, or carbon-fiber-reinforced resin, and the hiker should compare weight to cost. Titanium and carbon are lighter than aluminum, but more expensive. The tip material is

another option: Hikers like carbide tips because they grip the trail, but they do scour rocks; rubber tips don't leave marks behind, but do not grip as securely. Some poles even include internal springs that act as shock-absorbers that can be used on descents or deactivated during climbs.

There is a pole to meet almost any set of preferences, and every one will serve the many purposes mentioned above, from supporting the hiker to stabilizing a log crossing to splinting a broken leg. Trekking poles are important trail companions and a worthwhile investment.

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