

# Climbing Wisdom

## Preparing to Climb or Hike Difficult Mountains

\* Do I really need a disclaimer? \* See below.

**Try it and enjoy. Hiking and climbing are great fun.**

Hiking and mountain climbing are wonderful activities that you will remember your entire life. They are among the rare activities that provide athletic exhilaration, friendship, personal growth rewards, life change, and incredible beauty. Beginning a lifestyle that includes mountain life will benefit you in many ways far beyond the physical exertion.

Mountains have always been a beautiful attraction to me and a loved physical workout. As an adult, they became a personal friend that supports my growth. God gave me mountains as a method of navigating life and achieving personal health both physical and mental. They are part of my being. I love the mountains. I know they will never love me back, but they have always changed me for the better.

Along the way, I have learned about the mountains and about climbing. Part of my learning was simply experiencing the mountains, but I have also learned by asking questions and doing the basic research. That how life is. You need that research.

That learning lead me through the White Mountains of New Hampshire, into the Rockies of Colorado, and the Cascades. I will never forget my first 14er climb. It was Pikes Peak only one day after arrival from my home in Pennsylvania. It was a challenge and a beautiful day. Fortunately, I prepared both physically and mentally. Living in Pennsylvania does cause me to train vigorously for elevation, but it has not been a hinderance. Through training and preparation, I have completed wonderful climbs and achieved notable climbing speeds. I love the workout as well as the climb.

Learn and grow. Make yourself better. Never stay the same.

Here is a summary of what I have learned over the past few decades. I have learned through study, experience, and through both asking many questions and taking advice. These ideas have carried me through the wooded trails of Pennsylvania, the mountains of Vermont and New Hampshire, and many mountains in Colorado. Though somewhat partial, I will add more in time. Enjoy.

**\*\*\* Important message for all women at the end.**

**1) Get In Shape.** Condition yourself mentally and physically. Everything is more fun if you are fit and able to finish what you start. You will be able to go at the speed you choose and be able to enjoy the natural settings.

Get fit for specific events.

Train with your backpack, and make yourself work hard. You will need to train beyond what you think you need. The mountain will make everything more difficult and fatiguing. Remember, the training is a big part of the fun. Enjoy the training. Train hard and enjoy the hike. Remember to acclimate. Take a few days to exercise at elevation, then rest prior to the hike.

I found that varied training methods help. I regularly incorporate upper body and core workouts into my training. I love power hiking that includes intervals. I love uphill running. It is great for both mental and physical conditioning.

Listen to your body. Training injuries can really spoil your season. Hike, hike, hike. Do it to learn and enjoy.

Train in heat, humidity, and other difficult situations. It builds both physical and mental strength.

**You can overcome health problems if you train correctly.** I have asthma and have accomplished many very difficult athletic feats. Please get a medical check-up. Use your head. Know your body and its limitations.

I have asthma and have been able to get quite fit and hike rapidly at elevation. My fitness regiment helps, but proper medical planning and advice are essential. Simply, my asthma has not stopped me.

**Recovery.** Many people forget that recovery is not automatic. Get off your feet. I like to elevate my legs for a while after the climb. If

you go out at night and walk the town, don't be surprised if you feel like crap the next day.

**2) Do Your Homework.** There are many good websites: 14ers.com, Summit Post, The Hiking Project, and many others. I use 14ers.com the most because it gives me everything I need. I start there and end my research there. Check out personal hiking and climbing reports.

You can also find many good hiking and climbing journals posted online that give great insight for the day. It is good to read someone's personal experience ahead of the hike. Many hikers offer journal entries from previous climbers. Ask questions, and get maps. With all the great iPhone apps available you should be able to avoid many problems. It is also a good idea to carefully choose the appropriate mountain for you and your group. Know your mountain well. Some mountains may require a permit or parking reservation.

Before you touch the mountain, you should know the mountain in your head. It will be a huge advantage.

When you study the mountains, also learn about acute mountain sickness (AMS). Everyone will suffer from some level of elevation sickness. It may range from feeling much more fatigue, to severe headaches and nausea. Some climbers will become less cognitively aware. I like to arrive early the day or so prior to hitting any mountain. I hold off on alcohol and salt, and get plenty of sleep. Water is important. Taking a day or so to hike at intermediate elevations can help, but then remember to get good sleep at a lower elevation prior to your big climb.

**Sit down and think/plan your day ahead of time.** Get organized. Many unexpected problems can arise. Sort your gear in advance, and then sort it again. You do not want to pack too heavy; but then again, you need to be prepared for the plethora of obstacles and problems that occur in your climbing area.

**Take advice.** Do not be the stubborn person that thinks they know it all. Also, don't be the reason for the ambulance or mountain rescue because you did not listen to advice.

**Level 4 and above.** When it comes to Mt Rainier and other mountains at or above level 4, utilize a guide service. Even if you have experience with winter climbing, and possibly Mt. Baker, when

it comes to Mt. Rainier and other significant class 4 climbs, do not assume you complete the climb, avoid getting lost, or even avoid injury. You will find a friendly group of people and an experience guide at many services such as RMI, IMG, and through REI (plus more).

**Prepare.** Prepare yourself with more skills and knowledge than you will need. Prepare your pack to support you in a worst-case scenario, or changes in weather. Bad days happen. People make mistakes.

**Parking.** Learn the parking and trailhead. You may need a permit or reservation. Parking may fill by 5 AM, and at some mountains by 3 AM.

**3) Choose Good Equipment and Practice With It.** Do not purchase the bargains. Saving a few dollars is just not worth the misery of an equipment failure. A few dollars more will pay off immensely in your climbing and hiking enjoyment. Plus, if you purchase cheap equipment this year, you will only re-purchase next year and wind up spending more money. Use a good day pack that is comfortable, reliable, and stable on your back. You will want to bring extra layers and rain gear. I pack an extra top shirt or fleece, and a packable rain jacket or covering. Plan carefully what you will need. Food and water should be packed for quick access, or you will not use it. Train with the pack carrying more weight than you expect to carry on your climb.

**Avoid cotton clothing.** There are many low-cost options for polyester and nylon clothing. You will pay a painful price when chaffing develops. Cotton has a low R value and does not breathe as well as polyester (lower R value equals less insulation). Get the right clothing and you will have a better day. Plus, it will last forever, so it is cheaper in the long run. This concept is especially true for your base layers.

By the way, you do not always need the super expensive name brands. I have found tons of great clothing for discount.

You may find me with a polo shirt on the trails.

**Get some good hiking poles.** Use that upper body. Hiking poles will also get you into a breathing rhythm. On the way down you will experience far less knee trouble. You can use the poles to brace

against the large down steps. I like collapsible poles. They are worth the money.

**Bring gloves.** Gloves are great for scrambling near the summit. You will never regret gloves. Not only will they keep you warm, and help with scrambling, but they will make using the trekking poles much easier.

\* Lay your equipment and food out to double check before you hit the sack the night before your climb. Make a note or you'll be sorry.

\* **Mandatory/Minimum Suggestions for Hiking and Climbing Back Packs.** This is not an all-inclusive list or an over night camping list. I am sure many of you will have other suggestions. Here is my list of absolute, safety, must-haves: Cell Phone, Down-Loadable Maps, Paper Map, Battery Pack and Cord, Extra Socks, Emergency Blanket, Emergency Poncho, Plastic Trowel for Poop (or poop bags), Plenty of Water (possible water filter), Food That You Like, Sunscreen, Lip Balm, Extra Shirt Layer, Inhalers and Medicines, Pocket Knife, Small Rope or Extra Shoelaces, Hiking Gloves, Whistle, And Plenty of Knowledge.

**4) Take Care of Your Feet.** Use good quality and broken-in shoes. Wear your shoes at least a few dozen miles prior to any important hike or climb. I recommend going with lighter shoes. Old wisdom was to use boots or heavy shoes. Be careful about that idea. Lighter but durable shoes will get you to the top with far less problems. You will be more comfortable, hike faster, have far fewer blisters, and enjoy the day. I like low-cut hiking shoes for nearly all my hikes and climbs. There are a few occasions in which I use a mid hiker.

**Use good merino wool socks.** Try a number of brands and discover what works for you. Do not wear cotton! People would often try liner socks under the merino wool to avoid blisters, but I have found that counterproductive. I am a blister king and have found that great socks can solve many issues. I found a brand that I like and have stayed with it for about twenty years. Some people like to preemptively tape certain blister areas to avoid problems.

**When hot spots develop on your feet, shoulders, or other areas, stop immediately.** Let it cool and fix the problem or it will make the remainder of your day miserable.

**Make your shoes snug but not overly tight on the way up (snug, never flopping).** That will allow for good control and slight

movement which may help avoid few blister problems. On the way down, tighten your shoes, but do not cut off your circulation or impede any nerves (you may feel numbness) but tight enough to prevent your feet from sliding front. When your feet slide front on the downhill you will develop blisters and painful toe sores. You will figure it out.

**5) Breathe.** Quiet breathing is not necessarily good breathing. Try this: Breathe in full, then purse your lips together as you push the air out. This is often called “pressure breathing,” though I have heard it called, “locomotive breath.” If your mouth is wide open when you exhale, the air will not completely be absorbed into the blood. It will escape too quickly. Pressure breathing might feel uncomfortable at first, so practice it. It will work. When you feel tired or lightheaded, over breathe (and do it all by pressure breathing), and you will find relief. When I hike or climb any mountain, I always use pressure breathing. Train with pressure breathing. You should see me go; and I am from sea-level in PA. **Let your arms move freely.** Get them out of your pack straps. If your straps are rubbing, fix the problem. But remember, you need to breathe.

**6) Take Breaks, But Use Caution on How to Take Breaks.** I tend to take twenty to thirty second breaks, to regroup the breathing. It works better for me than longer breaks. Water, food, and rest are needed. You must stop to energize, but don’t lose your momentum. A long break will also slow your heart. Then when you restart you might feel miserable or even lightheaded briefly for about a minute or two. After breaks of a couple minutes, I like to over breathe for my first thirty seconds of hiking when I restart (or hit a sudden uphill). That seems to help to avoid that restart problem. If you don’t over breathe at the re-start you may actually need to take a brief (five to ten second) mini break to re-establish your heart and breathing. Again, use pressure breathing. **Take periodic ten to twenty second breaks to stabilize the heart and breathing.** I restate this because it is important. It can be more effective than longer breaks.

**7) Food and Drink.**

**Drink water.** Drink more than you think you need. Your body is 70% water. Withhold water and you will pay a big price. Some people like water bladders. I have used one, but I always take a back-up water supply. Bladders can fail. But if used correctly, bladders can give you a good water intake. Personally, I have found water bladders cumbersome. I also have a hard time estimating my water intake. Therefore, I have gone to using bottles. I have found over the counter bottles work well.

On a recent climb of Mount Yale, I took two liters. For Longs Peak I took a little over two and a half liters.

**Eat Food.** Sounds ridiculous, right? You might find yourself under eating on a hike or climb. You need fuel. And don't bring only healthy food. On the hike or climb give yourself food that you enjoy. You eat healthy all year to get ready. Remember, in the climb you need food that you will like and eat. Imagine hiking or climbing all day and only looking forward to health food bars. That is not good. I like high, quick energy food on the way up. It will help the day move. But you do not need to eat too much until you summit. Bagels, cold pizza, cookies, sandwiches are good. I like to take mixed nuts. I enjoy them, plus they give the nutrition and low salt content I need.

**Electrolytes.** Yes, you will need a little more of the electrolytes, but not tremendously more. I carry water since it can be used for drinking, cleaning, and dowsing my head. We all need to drink water and add electrolytes. By drinking water only, you can give yourself a problem called hyponatremia when you have too much water with too little electrolytes. There are good electrolyte tablets that can be added to water if needed.

And be careful with Gatorade and similar products, because they do not always have the right balance. You need water. Sometimes, when I use additives like Gatorade I dilute it to reduce the strength.

**Recovery Drink and Food During and After the Hike.** You need to drink liquids and eat food during and immediately after any stressful physical activity. "Generally," it is taught that water and anything you will eat is good. But that is not a complete answer and can be dangerous. Think about your specific activity, the heat, duration, your overall health, and your personal body reactions. You will need some electrolytes. Be careful to not heavily overdo the water due to the possibility of hyponatremia (do some research

on that). Watch out for electrolyte drinks that are way over the top with added sugar. It will not feel very good when your gut is full of sugar. Also, the extreme sugar is never good for your system. It is generally a good idea to take more water than you think you will need.

**Here a short list of our preferences and what we have found useful.** Water, Gatorlyte (it has a better balance of electrolytes with a lower and more sensible sugar amount), Pickle Juice, Yellow Mustard, Potato Chips (the salt balance is great - they are a superfood - my opinion), Atkins drinks and bars, and just about anything you will want to eat. I love a piece of pizza or a bagel at the summit. We avoid many of the so-called healthy bars due to the sugar and price.

**Coffee.** Coffee is nearly all water. Though it can increase the urination slightly, it is not so much that you should be concerned. Go ahead and have that cup in the morning before a climb.

**Alcohol.** Avoid more than small amounts before and right after the climb. You came to climb the mountain, not get drunk. Alcohol will do nothing good for your activity.

**8) If You Have a Problem Be Willing to Turn Back.** Water leaks and food problems are serious. Live to climb another day. You may need to make a difficult decision for a friend. Take care of your friends on the hike when they are in trouble. AMS (acute mountain sickness) is very real. Headaches may be a first sign.

**Do not get “summit fever.”** As I said, live to climb another day! If a storm is approaching, I turn back. I remember the first time I had to turn back. It was when I reached 13,400 feet on Mt. LaPlata. Storm clouds appeared on the horizon. A few minutes later I heard thunder. At first, I did not want to turn back. It was a long fifteen seconds of arguing with myself. But I am still alive because I turned back. I also turned back on Mt. Shasta. But I was also on the mountain when people died because they did not turn back. Make wise choices.

**9) Start early.** It will give you time for adventure and to deal with unforeseen issues. It will also get you down before the storms develop. Be firm with yourself. If you cannot summit by a predetermined time, turn back. You will also need to get a parking



spot and use the facilities, if there are any. Many 14er parking lots in Colorado will fill by 5 AM, and some will fill earlier. I love to start extra early so I can eat, relax, and check the weather.

Get up early. Take care of yourself. And be relaxed.

Caution: some mountains have facilities, and some do not. Be prepared. I like to bring paper and bags, just in case.

**10) Weather - Check the Weather Forecast.** Make it an almost religious part of your planning. Mountain weather can change quickly. You do not want to get caught. There are very good weather sites online where you can get weather forecasts for specific mountains and approximate elevations. Apple Weather is good, but more specific information can be found at [MountainWeather.com](http://MountainWeather.com), local news and weather television stations. In more mountainous states such as Colorado and New Hampshire, those weather changes can be life threatening. Afternoon storms do and will roll in. In the Northeast, those weather changes can become quite cold and windy. In Colorado, expect thunderstorms. Mornings will generally bring beautiful weather conditions, but between noon and 2 PM clouds tend to build. Often thunderstorms can arrive over you before you are able to move to safety.

I have personally been forced to run down hill as an approaching storm moved toward me. Getting below tree line was a welcome sight. I have also personally warned uphill hikers on my way down Mt. Yale when an apparent storm was building. Unfortunately, some people did not listen, and deaths did occur that day.

**Talk to locals about your plans.** You can also check local weather service forecasts for elevation specific forecasts.

**11) Learn About the Local Animals and Plants.** Especially learn about the problem animals. Learn how to avoid problems. Learn to correctly use a bear-bag. Learn to spot those three shiny leaves (poison ivy). If you get into that nasty stuff, don't panic. Keep from touching any other parts of your body, and clean the area thoroughly.

**12) Communicate.** Tell people your plans, talk to locals, register at Trailheads when possible and check in with people when you return.

Have people check on you when you do not make predetermined communications.

**Carry personal Identification information.**

**13) Solo Hiking and Climbing Can Be a Serious Risk.** There are many things that can go wrong. Just imagine for a few minutes. It is not just you. It is about the people who are anxiously concerned about you.

But I am a hypocrite on this. I have often hiked solo. But I am very prepared for the chosen trail.

I always bring a whistle, cell phone, writing paper and pen, pepper spray, and a map.

Things can go wrong. Think it through and prepare. What if you need to stay overnight? Will you be prepared?

**14) Have Fun.** Meet people and enjoy the outdoors.

**15) Do You Have Insurance?** Did you purchase trip insurance? Trip insurance will not only cover the unfortunate cancellation of your trip due to illness, it will also cover your unforeseen problems. Your personal insurance will likely not cover that \$60,000 medical helicopter flight. Rescue costs can be extreme.

**16) Have Manners.** Courtesy goes a long way. Know trail etiquette. **Leave no Trace.** Leave it as good as you found it. Respect the property of others. Do the right thing.

**17) Remember to Bring/Pack These Things.** Bring gloves and use them. Protect yourself from the sun. Bring first aid, fire starter, and a knife.

**Keep your camera and phone secure.** If you need to use them, put them in a handy location but also secure. People lose things far too often.

**Bring extra food and water and leave it in your car.**

**18) You May Love the Mountain, But the Mountain Will Not Love You Back.**

**19) At The Summit - Reflect and Be Thankful.** Make friends. Enjoy some friendship at the summit.

**Enjoy the views and company at the summit.**

**Be thankful.** It is a wonderful world that we have been given. God gave us something beautiful. Remember that. Before I head down, I always pause to reflect and thank God.

**20) Hiking Down Is Still Hiking.** The downward hike or climb can be more difficult than on the way up. It can also lead to knee issues.

Be careful.

Of course, you do not want to head down too late. Make sure there is plenty of daylight.

**21) Keep a Log or Journal of Your Travels.** Pictures are great.

However, a personal journal of your trip is priceless. Share your stories. You loved it - so will others.

\*\*\* **Especially for women**

There is no doubt that women deal with particular and significant issues while active that seldom concern men. Most importantly, men need to pause and consider the needs and concerns for the women in the group hikes. Let's work to make the path more friendly and not ignore the concerns of other people.

Guys, imagine going on hikes and always being concerned for your safety. Imagine not being able to pee for your entire hiking time. We must all be cognizant of the needs of everyone in the group. Plan ahead. Make special arrangements for every need. The hiking group is not ready to hike until everyone is completely ready for the entire day. Do not wait until you arrive at the trail head to start thinking about parking, safety, and bathroom needs. Do a little homework, and preparation.

In regard to bathroom needs, there is a reasonable solution (reasonable for some). My wife, Carolyn, and I have looked into various ideas, and she has personally tested a few products. She has found a device on Amazon called "pStyle" to work the best. It is a simple urination funnel, and it really works (some products will not work at all). It has made our hikes much more enjoyable. Ladies,

with the pStyle you can now pee standing behind a tree and keep the hike going. Needless to say, you need to be willing.

It is also a good idea to bring those famous blue bags and a plastic trowel. Think about it.

More ideas are to come, but the best idea is to use your head.  
Good hiking and good climbing!

\* **Do I need to make a disclaimer?** I wish everyone would just use their heads..., think a little. This is risky stuff. Think ahead. Nothing that I state can eliminate risks or make your day problem free. Hiking and climbing includes your good judgment and condition. We never know what may occur. You take that risk. I cannot take your risk. The information in this site may or may not necessarily be accurate. So, do not view this as a textbook. Nothing I share can reduce your need to prepare, train, learn, and obtain the correct and operable equipment. This is not a warranty or guarantee. You are on your own. This is only friendly advice. I do not know you. It may not even be good for you to try any of this stuff at all. You are responsible for your own actions and results.

Also, make sure you are fully aware of your mental and physical health.