



FITNESS EXPERT

Vanessa O'Brien tackles calf pain, improving fitness and preparing for a challenging walking adventure.

QI enjoy doing a lot of hiking but often get pain in my calves. Is this normal and is there anything I can do to help it? *Alison, 58*

A Always wear comfortable, supportive footwear and socks, and make sure your legs and lower back are strong enough to cope with a long hike. Doing simple squat, lunge and step-up exercises several times a week helps to tone and strengthen your body for long, strenuous hikes. Then try shorter walks first to see how your legs feel and whether you are ready for a longer hike.

When walking, aim to balance your weight evenly between both legs and wear a backpack with both straps to avoid putting undue stress on one area. Trekking poles are helpful for many people to create a sense of balance.

After your hike, make sure you

stretch, using a foam roller to ease tension in the calves. Hold your leg still on the roller, letting gravity ease it into the muscle, rather than rolling back and forth. Stretch hamstrings by standing and placing one heel on a surface a little lower than your hip, flexing your foot and bending forward at the hips. Hold for 30 seconds. For your quadriceps, pull one foot behind you towards your bum, making sure your knee is pointing towards the floor and your pelvis is tucked under. Hold for 30 seconds, then switch feet.

Massage your calves too to release tension and lactic acid build up, which is what often causes a burning sensation.

QI've been regularly walking for two years but haven't noticed a big improvement in fitness for some time. Why is this?

Michelle, 42

A For our fitness levels to improve, we must 'surprise' our bodies by varying exercises and routines. An activity must also be strenuous enough to significantly lift our heart rate beyond its normal level, so quicken your pace to achieve this. Vary the routes you take, including more uphill and downhill sections, as these are more demanding. If you're able to start doing a few of these things, you'll get more out of breath and therefore work your body harder.

Technology can also help, whether that's using headphones to listen to uplifting music, or wearing a fitness watch/heart rate monitor, which is a fun way to measure your progress and improvement.

