

Hike Downhill Safely – Taking care when hiking downhill

Hikers do need to be careful when hiking downhill because that is when slipping and tumbling are most likely to occur. Going downhill is also hard on joints and muscles. The problem is made worse by the tendency to take the downhill part of the hike for granted as the “easy part” and get careless. Here are some tips to make the descent safer and easier on your body:

- Keep your center of gravity low and directly over your legs. Don't lean forward or backward. If the gradient is steep, take shorter steps to keep your center of gravity over your legs.
- Minimize stress on knees by keeping the forward leg slightly bent on impact, that way the muscles take more of the strain and the joints take less.
- Hike “flat footed”, not heel first as you would normally hike. Watch for stones and twigs that can become rollers under your feet. In snow or soft scree (rocky debris), however, try the “plunge step”, driving your heel into the soft snow or scree to create a foothold.
- If the slope is steep or slippery, edge down sideways with toes pointed across the hill rather than downward, use the uphill hand for balance if you slip, and slip into the hill, not forward.
- On especially treacherous hills, “crab walk” on all-fours, either with your head uphill but facing downward to see what's ahead or facing the hill if you are sure that there are no surprises ahead. For even more security, crab walk while sliding on your butt.
- Poles can help with maintaining balance on hills, but don't put your full weight on them or rely on them completely. It might be better to pack them and crab walk down.
- Finally, the surest road to disaster on a downhill hike is to start running or to slip into an uncontrolled roll.

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