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HEALTHY CHOICES FOR MIND AND BODY

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MATRONS IN POLAND DO IT... *by Ann Gerhardt, MD (Request a free email subscription via algerhardt@sbcglobal.net, or send \$15 for a paper copy to P.O.Box 19274, Sacramento, CA 95819. Reprints permissible only if the entire pages are kept intact.)*

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Attire and appearance seemingly matter little to the throngs of Poles and tourists drawn to the Polish Tatra Mountains' idyllic valleys, lush forested hills and panoramic views. People don't seem to notice that they don't match the stereotypical hiker - Not the purse-toting matrons picking their way stone by stone or the gawky teens striding steep trails.

We've just returned from Poland, where we wandered miles of urban streets, hiked remote dirt roads and trekked the mountains. Though we met few walkers on rural roads, the urban streets and National Park trails teemed with travelers on foot. Congested cities and the high cost of cars and gasoline (equivalent to \$5.40 per gallon) easily explain busy sidewalks and packed trains and buses. It appears that beauty and a lack of intimidation attract walkers, even non-traditional types, to the mountains.

The Poles, unlike Americans, do not seem to be hampered by image, at least as it relates to hiking. This **marvelous attitude means that image is one less barrier to fun fitness**. Children bop from stone to stone, large groups of fashionable teens chatter their way along trails, and aged nuns, sporting full habit, sturdy shoes and backpacks, hoof their way up the hill. The few sinewy, serious hikers, in full mountain-wear and sturdy boots (minus the Tyrolean hats), constitute the minority.

Hiking is terrific exercise. Burning calories depends on moving a mass (yours and your pack) through distance (the trail). Muscular efficiency also affects calories necessary to complete the walk. **The larger the mass, the longer the trail and the worse the efficiency, the greater number of calories burned.** Whether you take one or three hours to complete a trail, you've burned the same number of calories.

There is no rule about speed on trails. Bounding up and down a trail requires more muscle and cardio-respiratory fitness than does dawdling, which **permits seeing and appreciating more lizards, lupin and scenic vistas**. Moseying along for miles over many days eventually builds muscles and fitness. Once you have the muscles and fitness, you can choose to bound or mosey - Either way, you get more out of hiking than driving.

With hiking, every muscle from the waist down to the toes is necessary to hoist the body up, propel forward, maintain balance and absorb the impact of stepping down. Walking poles strengthen the arms and back muscles, while assisting with balance and protecting knees. Weight training in the gym selects one or a few muscles to strengthen. Hiking a trail exercises them all at once, while improving heart and lung function. A current fitness fad focuses on balance, suggesting we stand on one foot for a prolonged time - How *boring*, unless you are the Karate Kid practicing the stork move by the ocean. Hike an uneven trail, and **balance, fitness and strength gradually develop without thinking about it.**

Trekking is a good way to add variety to an exercise program. There is no rule that exercise has to be the same activity every day. Mixing up more mundane exercise with a walk to the end of a bus line (and take the bus back) or a weekend hike in the hills is a good thing.

Hiking Tips: Take water - about 16 ounces for each hour of hiking – more in hot weather. Wear lighter clothing for uphill. Carry warm clothes that can be layered for downhill. You might even need gloves, jacket and hat for exposed peaks. Poles are good but not necessary. Use firm soled shoes, with good ankle support, not only for your ankles, but also to keep your toes from jamming into the toe of the shoe.