TRAIL **MASTERCLASS**

Are there ways to make walking up hills easier on my back?

The muscles in your back are heavily relied upon for hillwalking, so it is important to employ the correct techniques to look after them, explains guest expert **Neville Shortt**.

PHOTOGRAPHY **ANDY TAYLOR**

ABOUT NEVILLE

Neville Shortt is a Glasgow-based Winter Mountain Leader and Alexander Technique teacher. To contact him for coaching or further information regarding Alexander Technique, visit **www.flowcoach.me**

Q I often return from a day out on the hills with a stiff and aching back. Are there any steps I can take to stop this from happening?
Chris Duffy, Manchester

Cynics will tell you there are two kinds of people in this world – those who have back pain and those who are going to get back pain. Thankfully, reality is much kinder, as back pain can both be avoided and eliminated. But it is very much a question of what you do – or even of what you don't do – and this is especially important on the hill.

Mountain-goers nearly always carry weight on their back in the form of a rucksack. And during the winter particularly, when more gear is required, these packs may prove an unnatural burden. Pack weight may not be the sole cause of back pain though, as how you load the weight and poor posture can also have ill-effects on your back

health. It might come as no surprise then that back pain and back injuries are one of the most common ailments suffered by hillwalkers.

With that in mind, here are six tips from Neville Shortt, an Alexander Technique coach and expert, for avoiding or eliminating back pain while out in the hills.

Carry less weight
First, let's deal with the obvious – the less weight you carry on your back the easier life will be for your back. So if this is an area that is already giving you trouble, then lightweight kit or simply less kit may be just the thing for you. However, there is an alternative...

Transfer the weight onto your hips
Most daypacks are too small to have a waistbelt. This means all the weight hangs off the shoulders, and in many cases presses into the lower back, which further compromises your posture. Unlikely as it sounds, using a bigger rucksack that can transfer the weight onto your hips can make the load easier to carry. Personally, I find myself increasingly using a slim climber's pack on day walks. Although its 40-litre capacity frequently tempts me into carrying more than I need, the added benefit of a waistbelt means I'm carrying less on the shoulders than I would otherwise.

Two legs good, but four better!
Another way of taking some weight off your back is by supporting yourself a little on your arms. Using walking poles could be just what you need to relieve any aches and pains you are experiencing, as any weight that goes through the poles (potentially 10% of your body weight) would otherwise be taken by your back.

Hold your head with care
Walking, when done well, is an activity that subtly uses the whole body and not just the legs. Given the head weighs about 10lb (or 4.5kg to you metrically-minded folk), walking with it too far forward means the back has to do a lot of work merely to support it. Simply looking at the ground, as many are prone to do, can have this unwanted effect. Instead keep your eyes on the prize at all time with your head upright. Look to the horizon and scan for obstacles ahead with just your eyes.

Take it lying down!
Most walkers will spend an entire day of hillwalking either sitting, standing or walking. All those activities require the back to, as a minimum, support the torso. Lunchtime is the ideal occasion to give your back a proper break by lying down. Lying for 20 minutes allows the spinal discs to fully rehydrate, which relieves the associated muscles and tendons. If your day is back-breaking, give your back a break!

It's better by coach
They say you can't run before you can walk. You also can't walk before you can stand. Most of us have a sense of how competent we are at this, and we often refer to it as 'posture'. In reality it's a more dynamic activity than that word implies. My advice, as it worked for me, is to get some coaching from a professional. Because, pretty much anyone can help you to talk the talk, but a teacher of Alexander Technique can help you walk the walk.