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**Fourteener Fitness**  
*How to prepare for peak condition*  
By Janet Reese

Snow is in the air, but it's not too early to start getting in shape for summer activities. While some people are setting their sights on running a marathon, bike racing or competing in a triathlon next summer, I plan to climb a Colorado Fourteener, a marathon of its own kind.

Over the last four years, a group of friends and I have made it a goal to climb a Fourteener annually. Why? We love the accomplishment of hiking 15 miles and gaining over 4,000 feet in elevation. Most of all, we enjoy the camaraderie of reaching the summit together and sharing the spectacular views.

If you haven't climbed a 14,000-foot peak, you may be intrigued by the challenge. If you've reached a Fourteener summit, you may be anxious to climb more. Colorado has 54 peaks higher than 14,000 feet and only about 1,000 people have bagged them all.

This article is about how to prepare and condition for bagging a Fourteener using a three-step approach: plan, prepare, and do.

**Plan.** Read Gerry Roach's classic book "Colorado Fourteeners." This book describes the location, routes and level of difficulty for each Fourteener. Mount Sherman is one of the easiest for a first climb. Mount Bierstadt, Grays Peak, Torreys Peak, and Quandary Peak also are considered easier climbs. Longs Peak is one of the more difficult.

Once you decide on a peak, set the date for your climb. Late June through September is a preferred time of year. Winter climbing is gaining in popularity among experienced climbers who want to avoid summer crowds and test their winter mountaineering skills. Mt. Bierstadt is popular for winter ascents because of its year-round access from Guanella Pass and minimal avalanche danger on the West slope route, the easiest route.

**Prepare.** Your climb begins long before you reach the trailhead. Assess your physical condition. Are you strong and in shape or do you need to build up your leg muscles and aerobic capacity? Start a conditioning program or fortify the one you already have. Every fitness program should begin with a doctor's check-up to make sure you have no lurking risk factors.

The three major components of any exercise routine are aerobic endurance, strength training and flexibility exercises. Aerobic exercise strengthens the heart, lungs, and circulatory system, and helps to lower cholesterol and blood pressure. Strength training increases muscle strength, endurance, bone density, and prevents muscle loss that occurs with aging. Stretching helps the body maintain flexibility and healthy joints.

Exercise guidelines from the American College of Sports Medicine say to aim for 20-60 minutes of aerobic exercise such as walking, skiing, snow shoeing, cycling and stair climbing three to five days a week; 20 minutes of strength training such as lifting weights two to three times a week; and stretching the major muscle groups two to three times a week.

In addition to maintaining a year-round exercise program, I take as many conditioning hikes as I can on Front Range trails in the spring. In June when the snow begins to melt, I go higher for longer hikes. You'll want to take several hikes with an altitude gain of 3,000 feet or more and a distance of 10 or more miles.

Dale DeVoe, Ph.D., professor, Department of Health and Exercise Science at Colorado State University, says, "At least eight weeks before your climb, spend five days a week doing activity-specific exercises such as climbing stairs and hiking that strengthen the quadriceps. For example, weekly Monday, Wednesday and Friday, use a StairMaster or walk up and down stairs 50 minutes to an hour. Saturday, do any cardio respiratory endurance exercise you enjoy such as bike riding, jogging, soccer or a combination of activities for one to three hours. Sunday take an hour to 90-minute hike wearing your backpack. This will allow your muscles and joints to get used to carrying additional weight. Take off Tuesday and Thursday for muscle recovery. Gradually increase your hiking time and distance. Stretch before and after workouts."

In preparation for a trek, select sturdy, high-quality and comfortable hiking boots and break them in months before your climb. Make sure your backpack fits comfortably and can carry the "10 essentials" listed in the side bar.

**Do.** If the peak is far from Denver, stay in a motel or camp near the trailhead the night before your climb. On the big day, follow through with your plan. Leave the trailhead before 6 a.m. and summit by 11 a.m. to reduce your chance of getting caught in a thunderstorm, which can move in quickly. Lightening is your greatest hazard and you want to be below tree line before it becomes likely. We began our Mount Harvard climb on June 27 at 5:45 a.m., reached the summit at 10:30 a.m. and started down at about 10:45 a.m. It was a good thing we did because snow, rain and

thunderstorms moved in after we were off the summit. We returned safely to the trailhead about 3:45 p.m.

On the ascent, take breaks, pace yourself, carry plenty of water, and eat lots of high-energy snacks. Remember to pack out what you pack in.

When you reach the summit, congratulate yourself and your hiking buddies, take pictures, and enjoy the views. But be aware -- the most difficult part of a summit trek is descending. Many hikers use trekking poles to alleviate impact on the joints. Once you're back at the trailhead, celebrate!

### **10 Essentials**

Be sure your backpack contains the 10 essentials:

1. Map and compass
2. At least two liters or two quarts of water
3. Lunch, plus extra food
4. Rain/wind parka and pants
5. Extra layers of clothing: wool or synthetic insulating layer, gloves/mittens, neck gator, warm hat, and socks. Avoid cotton clothing because cotton does not insulate when wet.
6. Waterproof matches and lighter, plus firestarter
7. Sunglasses, goggles
8. Sunscreen and lip balm
9. Pocket knife
10. First aid supplies

### **Safety tips**

Safety is always the most important consideration in mountain hiking. Here are a few safety tips:

- Take the Wilderness Trekking course at Golden-based Colorado Mountain Club ([www.cmc.org](http://www.cmc.org)).
- Travel with experienced hikers and stay together while hiking.
- Altitude sickness is aided only by descent.
- Watch for hypothermia.
- Bring a cell phone and be aware of areas with reception.

- Tell someone when you are leaving, where you are staying/camping, when and where you are hiking, and when you plan to return.
- If you are going to travel in winter, learn about avalanche safety.

*Janet Reese, principal of Centennial-based Reese Communications ([www.RinPR.com](http://www.RinPR.com)), is a freelance writer and public relations consultant. She has climbed 14 Fourteeners.*

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