

Trekking Training

Alex Shirley demonstrates some simple stretches and exercises that will help alleviate the back and shoulder pain experienced from carrying a heavy pack

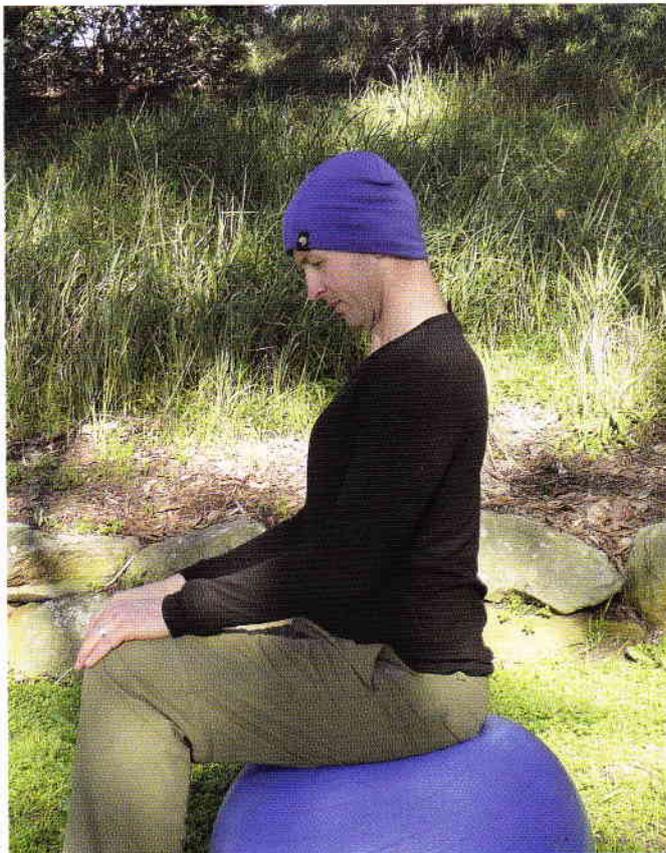
Do you love going for bushwalks but find that your upper back and shoulders really don't enjoy carrying a pack? Many people avoid going on extended walks because of this discomfort, or simply put up with the pain and accept it as a natural part of the trekking or bushwalking experience. Luckily it doesn't have to be this way. Regularly carrying out just three key stretches and one simple strength exercise can significantly reduce the tension in these muscles and ensure that bushwalking with a pack is a much more enjoyable experience.

The human body is designed to be upright. In the modern world, however, we spend a great deal of time sitting for extended periods and this unnatural position causes some of our muscles to shorten and tighten, and others to lengthen and weaken. This process

gradually brings our muscles out of balance and can lead to poor posture. If you just look around you, most people today have a head that sticks slightly forward and rounded shoulders – compare that to young children who stand tall and upright, or African tribesmen walking straight with heavy loads on their heads. The poor posture of a modern lifestyle is a major contributing factor in the upper back and shoulder discomfort experienced when carrying a pack.

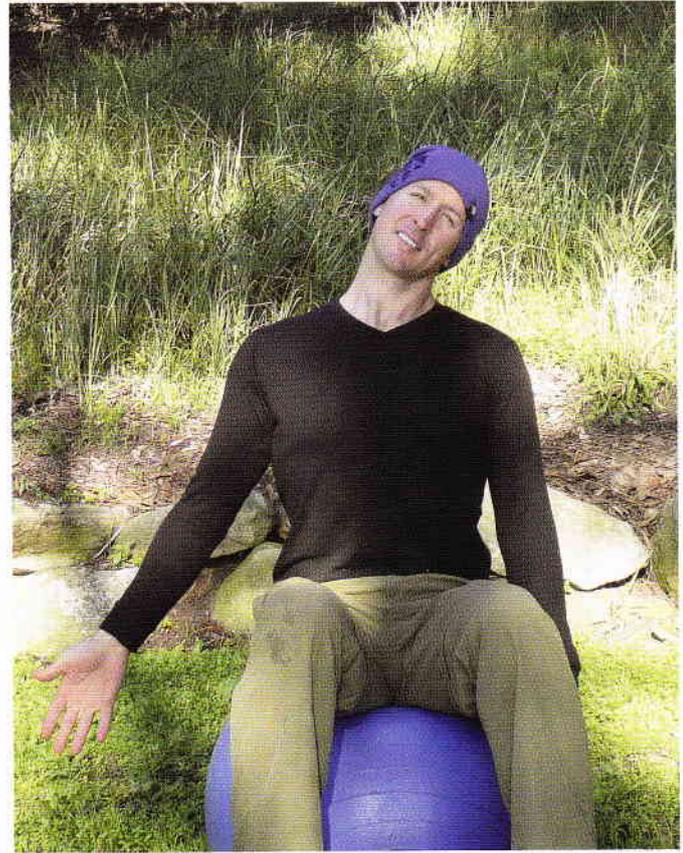
So how do we correct these imbalances? By stretching our tight muscles and strengthening our weak muscles we can help to improve our posture and allow our bodies to work more efficiently – this will then greatly reduce muscle tension, enhancing your trek!

The following exercises have been designed specifically to help with upper back and shoulder issues from carrying a pack.



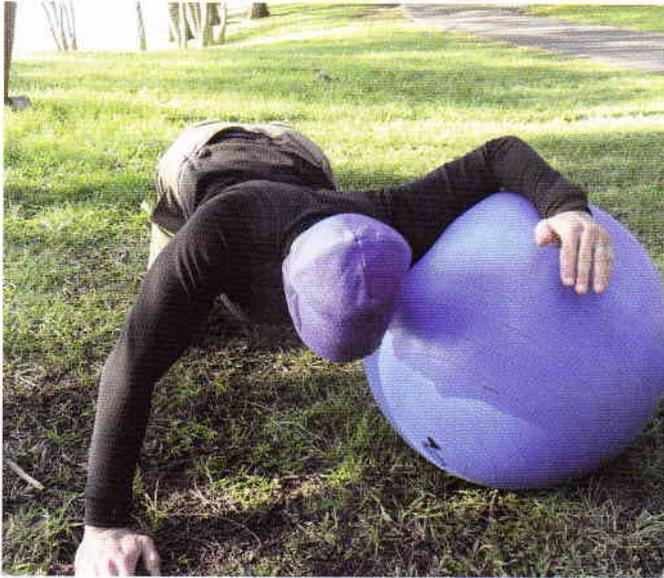
NECK EXTENSOR STRETCH

- Maintaining good posture, drop your shoulders away from your ears.
- Tuck your chin and roll your head forward until your chin meets your chest (imagine you are creating a 'double chin').
- Hold for 20 to 30 seconds, repeat two to three times.
- Always move through a pain-free range!
- Move slowly.



UPPER TRAPS STRETCH

- Sit on a Swiss ball or bench with good posture and hold out your left arm to the side.
- Tuck your chin in and slowly draw your right ear to your right shoulder until a moderate stretch is felt.
- Hold at first resistance barrier for 20 to 30 seconds. Repeat two to three times and then swap sides.



CHEST STRETCH

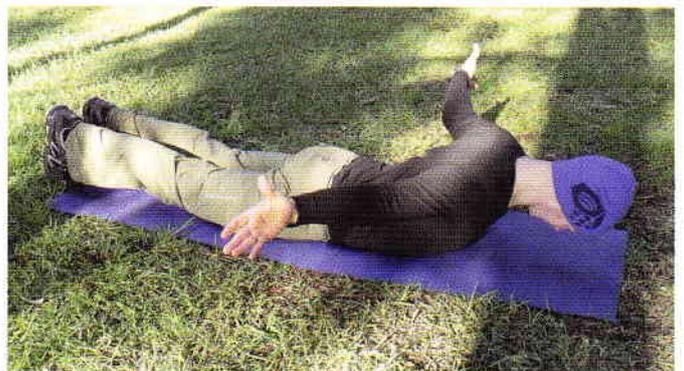
- Start in a kneeling position.
- Place your right forearm on a Swiss ball or on a chair with your palm down and shoulder parallel to the floor.
- Maintaining optimal posture, allow your chest to slowly drop downward.
- Hold at first resistance barrier for 20 to 30 seconds, relax and move into newly acquired range of movement, repeat two to three times.

Ideally you want to carry out these stretches daily. Performing them first thing in the morning or just before going to bed will give the best results. When you are heading out on a bushwalk, carry out the stretches before you walk, when you rest and when you get to your destination – they only take two to three minutes and the short time they take to perform is well worth it.

The following strength exercise is designed to strengthen the postural muscles of your upper back. It should be carried out two to three times each week and can be included at the end of any fitness training or walking that you do.

PRONE COBRA

- Lie face down on the floor in a prone position, with your arms just in front of your hips.
- Activate your core by drawing in your belly button towards your spine and squeeze your glutes (bottom) together.
- With your core and glutes activated and your chin tucked into the chest, lift your chest off the floor, lift your arms up and back towards the hips rotating thumbs towards the ceiling.
- Pause for five to ten seconds at the top of the lift then return to the starting position; at all times keeping the chin tucked into the chest. Upon completion of the movement, repeat ten to 15 times.
- Don't over-emphasize the arching of the back to lift the chest off the floor – try and lengthen through the crown of your head instead. No lower back pain should be felt during this exercise.



In addition to carrying out these exercises it is very important to gradually get used to carrying a pack before you head out on a big trek or bushwalk. You can't just expect your body to suddenly adapt to carrying a heavy pack if you don't normally wear one. Ideally you want to start going out for training walks with a light rucksack weighing around four to five kilograms. You will then want to gradually increase this weight over a ten to 12 week period, slowly building up to the pack weight that you will be using on your walk. Rather than shocking your body with a heavy pack it isn't used to and potentially causing yourself an injury, this will give your body time to adapt and strengthen so that you can

comfortably head off on your trek. Imagine how great you will feel the next time you go for a long bushwalk when you have carried out these quick and simple exercises!

Alex Shirley runs *PrimalFit*, an outdoor fitness service based in Sydney that specialises in training clients for challenging trekking expeditions like Kokoda, Everest Base Camp, Kilimanjaro or the Oxfam Trailwalker. primalfit.com.au