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by Stephanie Stephens

Pete Edwards of Empire, Michigan, is a veteran Nordic walking coach who has helped hundreds of people with movement disabilities—including wounded veterans—select the correct poles, which are determined according to height.

At first glance, Nordic walking poles look like hiking or trekking poles; however, Nordic poles often are lighter in weight and are usually a fixed length that corresponds to the walker’s height, as opposed to the adjustable length, twist-to-lock poles used for hiking or trekking.

Neither Edwards nor physical therapist Peter Schmitt, DPT, are fans of collapsible poles. One length makes the poles used for Nordic walking safer, lighter and more durable, Edwards says. Two- or three-piece hiking poles might “vibrate” when hitting the ground, or collapse unexpectedly, causing a fall—especially if they’re very inexpensive. Also, adjustment for terrain isn’t so critical for Nordic walking because the sport is usually done on flat or gently undulating terrain.

In addition to a fingerless glove, Nordic walking poles have interchangeable cantilevered tips, or “paws,” that adapt to different surfaces. Rubber tips work on pavement, while spikes can help navigate dirt trails, sand, snow and ice. Poles can be purchased at sporting goods stores and online, and range from \$50 to \$200. They’re considered non-medical devices, so they are not covered by insurance.

Nancy Mayo, PhD, a physical therapist and professor, doesn’t recommend “all poles all the

time.”

“They’re a tool, and everyone needs to find their own way of using them,” she says. “Most of the participants [in our study] say, ‘Yes, I really like Nordic poles. I look healthy—like somebody who doesn’t have a health condition.’”

Stephanie Stephens is a multimedia journalist specializing in health and lifestyle topics.