

## Get a Grip Selecting the right traction for winter hiking

Story by Matt Heid  
*AMC Outdoors*, December 2014

Ah, winter: Season of outdoor thrills and potentially butt-crunching spills. When snow and ice create dangerous conditions underfoot—from city sidewalks to rugged mountain trails—adding a winter traction system to your footwear will provide the grip you need to stay safely upright. Here are the options, from casual to extreme, to keep you on your feet this slippery season.

### Short Sidewalk Sojourns

Do your driveway and sidewalks become occasional rinks of peril? Would a little extra traction provide an essential measure of safety? For intermittent, around-town use, a pair of simple pull-on grippers will generally suffice. Popularized by [YakTrax](#), these feature a stretchy upper that snaps into place over your footwear; a series of small metal coils underfoot provide reasonable traction on packed snow and ice. Lightweight, easy-to-use, and inexpensive (\$20 to \$40, depending on style), these are a good option for occasional use in day-to-day winter life. They are a poor choice for regular and extended use, however, as well as most winter hiking. They are easily damaged, provide poor traction on slippery slopes, and tend to shift around on your footwear over uneven terrain.

### Serious Sidewalk Sojourns and Casual Hikes

Is extensive snow and ice a regular feature of your winter existence? Do you spend significant time walking around outside, including short forays into nearby woods and parks? To meet your needs, consider a beefier, grippier option.

A range of styles exist in the spectrum between simple YakTrax and full crampons. [STABILicers](#) have long been a stalwart option in this category. Produced by a small company in Maine, the [classic, time-tested design](#) (\$49) features dozens of replaceable metal cleats attached to a thick rubber sole that lashes securely to your footwear.

Toothier yet are pull-on options with beefy rubber uppers and an interlinked series of metal chains and short metal points underfoot. This design, pioneered by the [Kahtoola MicroSpikes](#) (\$65, another proven option), and replicated by others, including [ICEtrekkers](#), [Hillsound](#), and [YakTrax](#), adds significant bite to your grip.

This category is best for those who spend significant time on snow- and ice-covered sidewalks or easy winter trails (read: rolling terrain with few significant climbs or descents). They are not ideal for travel over rugged and uneven terrain as the traction system can shift on your footwear, especially on steep slopes.

### Serious Winter Hiking

Do you climb steep slopes and serious mountains, traveling over many miles of ice and hard-packed snow? You need a set of crampons. Featuring pointy metal teeth that stab into ice and snow, they attach securely to your footwear and provide a stable step on challenging winter terrain.

Crampons vary in design, but fall into two main categories: aluminum and steel. A classic 10-point design is common in both categories. It usually features two front points curving out ahead of the toes and provides solid traction over a variety of winter terrain.

Aluminum crampons are lighter weight (roughly 1 pound per pair), less expensive (\$125 to \$175), and often accommodate more flexible footwear than their stiffer steel counterparts. Aluminum is softer than steel, however, and the points underfoot tend to be less sharp—and dull faster—than steel versions. They are a good option for hikes where crampons are only occasionally needed or for travel over mostly hard-packed snow with only the occasional steep icy section.

Steel crampons offer the ultimate in winter grip and durability, but are heavy (1.5 to 2-plus pounds per pair), more expensive (\$130 to \$200-plus), and generally require a very stiff or completely rigid mountaineering boot for a secure attachment. For serious adventuring and mountaineering activities, including peak-bagging the high summits, steel crampons are the way to go. (Note that some steel crampons are specifically designed for ice climbing and feature longer, beefier front points—not a great option for general hiking.)

May the ground stay beneath your feet this glorious season!

---

→ LEARN MORE

Read more about winter traction options on AMC's [Equipped](#) blog.

[Flexible, Lightweight Crampons](#)

[Aluminum Crampons](#)

[Winter Traction Systems](#)

[The Best Winter Traction for Your Shoes](#)

Interested in testing a Hillsound winter traction system? Ask the front desk of AMC's [Joe Dodge Lodge](#) this winter.

Kahtoolah and Hillsound traction are also available at the [AMC Online Store](#) - members save 10% on gear.

© Copyright 2014 All Rights Reserved. Appalachian Mountain Club, 5 Joy Street, Boston, MA 02108 P: 617-523-0655 F: 617-523-0722