

**Chris Stewart**  
Exeter

# Walking 100 Miles

## A stoma, a rucksack, and a good pair of boots.

Chris Stewart shares diary entries from his amazing 100-mile fundraising trek across the Scottish Highlands, from Milngavie to Fort William, in support of IA. We think it just goes to show how much one person can achieve when they put their mind to it - stoma or no stoma!

### Introduction

In 2015, I received my diagnosis of a rare bowel condition which, without surgery, had a 100% chance of becoming cancer. My late diagnosis meant that they feared that unless surgery was soon, I would not live more than a year.

In June, I embarked on a 6-day trek to raise funds and awareness for IA. I crossed a huge variety of scenery along the way, from countryside parks to loch-shores, and from open moorlands to steep mountains. This was a solo, self-sufficient trek, carrying everything I needed, from food and shelter to emergency kit, clothing, and of course my stoma supplies!

I hoped to prove that having a stoma doesn't limit us, or stop us from doing anything that someone without a stoma could do.



Only 100 miles to go.

### Day 1

Well today was hot. I mean, I was expecting hot, but this was HOT hot!

The main issue was fluids. I carry a 1.5 litre water pouch with a handy drinking tube; this allows drinking little and often without even pausing. Having to stop twice to refill takes quite a while with my mini water filter pump.

It can be tricky balancing need for water with weight. A litre of water weighs a kilo, and in a pack of 20kg or so, every bit you can save is worth it, and I find 1.5 litres and my water filter gets me from stream to stream.

We ostomates don't absorb nutrients particularly well, and too much water can actually make the issue worse where we are not getting the electrolytes. The other problem is that lots of water gives us really watery output in our bag. Not very comfortable when out walking.

I carried some electrolyte tablets. You can also get it as powder. 4 of those drinks a day alongside water helped a lot. You can get various gelling agents that you use in your bag. I tried a couple and didn't get on with them, but I got samples of ostomy pearls, and they work a treat; makes it a lot more comfortable.

Anyway, I got what I needed, and I have an extra fold-up water carrier for overnight too. It has a tap and hangs so it's a really useful bit of kit, and it rolls up very small and weighs next to nothing.

I set off carrying 6 days' worth of food. Nothing fancy: boil in the bag hiking meals, dry noodles, a tin of ham, another of tuna, and some dry pasta packets. I will be burning about 6000 calories a day; each evening camping meal is almost 3000, and snacks and noodles/pasta make up the rest for lunch.

Important things for both hiking and folk with a stoma: nutrition and hydration are the top two for both. Often what is easy to carry and cook is not great for a stoma, but fresh is wildly impractical for 6 days!

I had been worried about how my stoma appliance would fare with the heat, and the extra problem of the way the hip strap on my rucksack sits right above my bag.

As it turned out, it did really well. I use a 2-piece bag system so that I can get rid of gas easily, and I use some silicone flange extenders. I find the silicone doesn't peel away so easily from sweating. I also found that they stopped any rubbing from the hip strap on the flange.

So fed and watered, it's bed time! And no midgies which feels like a miracle!

## Day 2

Well, today was a rocky start... As I was leaving the forest I had camped in, I saw a curly stick in the track and went to turn it with my walking pole, only to realise it was a small dark snake. Anyone that knows me will know how I would feel about this. The one animal I am afraid of is snakes, and so the track was effectively closed for 10 minutes while I stayed back and let it cross.

Luckily I have a stoma bag, or I might have needed new boxer shorts! I covered the last mile or so through the forest in double-quick time.

I then came to a point where you bear right to go up a track, winding up a huge hill, or left and down a mild slope to the bank of the loch. I had decided last night I would take the low road to the bank. I forgot, however, to alter my route on the map. So up the hill I went after realising a mile and a half too late!

The rest of the day was hard work; very hot again and getting a bit hillier. It was a nice day though, and the last part of the day walking alongside the loch was beautiful.

I helped a young couple at a crossroads who had forgotten their way. Top tip: even if it's a

short walk you're taking, bring a map, or it can turn into a much longer walk than planned!

Once I had made camp and dipped my legs into the loch, I checked my stoma and was surprised how well it was all holding up. I don't often hike in that kind of heat, but even the flange extenders were holding on! The pouch system I use is really thin and flexible, and sticks well, but I think it will need changing soon.

I start heading into the Highlands tomorrow.

### Day 3

There was a very light misting for a while late morning, and approaching lunch time I slipped on a large tree root that formed a step in the track. I came down really hard on my shoulder, jarring it, so lunchtime came early - as did the midgies!

The afternoon was interesting, some of the historical points and so on, getting increasingly drizzly with rain but nothing a waterproof jacket couldn't solve!

Camp was made a bit earlier than planned to let my shoulder rest a bit. Halfway through pitching my tent, chaos broke as the sky erupted in a hail storm, forcing me to hide under my tarpaulin.

After the hailstorm, the midges stayed for dinner time - unfortunately, I was their dinner.

### Day 4

Well, Day 4 started out quite rainy. It will be a tough day of walking today, and part of my route will take me over one of the old drovers' trails used by the livestock farmers of the highlands from the 16th to 19th

century. The part I will be walking was also used by the English Redcoat soldiers during the Massacre of Glencoe. But the day won't walk itself!

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Today was really hard work; the drover trail was really steep and the rain was heavy with high humidity. Not great walking conditions!

My brother called me while I was walking, great to chat to him, but the call had to be abandoned because of the rain running down my phone. Still, great to hear his voice! Had a chance for a lovely chat with my Mum while I was cooking my dinner and being eaten alive by the midgies. It was great to talk to her, and really brought me a lot of support.

So I am going to relax this evening, rest some and set off tomorrow on the next section, which will be going deeper into the Highlands.

I ended up having to change my stoma bag this evening. It wasn't quite as bad as I thought, however, good to get it done and for the peace of mind. Was not much fun doing it with the midgies around though. I will need to invest in a tall mosquito net that I can sit up in.

### Day 5

Well in waking this morning, there is no way to tell what the weather is going to do! It is going to be a beautiful view though. I will be coming into the Glencoe Valley, somewhere I have wanted to see since I was little, when my grandfather would tell me stories of Scottish history. That will also make it a tough day emotionally. He died almost exactly 2 years ago, and it is hard knowing that I will not be able to tell him about my trip, and as a keen photographer he would have loved seeing the photos.



Chris walked over rolling hills and babbling brooks.

Tomorrow I will be crossing the finish line at around 4pm. I'm currently just 15 miles away!

Well today started with walking along with Andrew and his brother-in-law Richard, lovely chaps up from Wales. The hike was hard work. There was a very big hill in the way, and a section of the route called the Devil's Staircase. A long track zigzagging up the hill, then coming back down into more rain driving at me. By the time I got close to Kinlochleven I was too exhausted to pass through the village to camp on the way out, so I pitched up very unceremoniously beside a water pipeline for the new hydroelectric plant. Not very picturesque, but I just needed to get my head down!

The evening was nice and cool, and I ate all my spare food. I wanted to make my pack as light as I could for the last day. I quite enjoyed the mini feast. I think I had been running a bit too low on calories!

My stoma bag has been really well behaved, and I also found today that the silicone flange extenders I use are great for blisters and stopping some rubbing! I had to find this, after all my blister plasters had gotten wet. The flange extenders are waterproof, so that should help!

So tonight I rest and tomorrow the last bits, and the walk into Fort William.

## Day 6

I am really excited and frankly a bit emotional. This has been a really hard challenge. Every muscle is aching, my feet have blisters on top of blisters, I am mentally tired, and I feel like I am running on empty. This was never going to be a nice relaxing walking holiday, but the level of work it has required has taken me a bit by surprise. I have really enjoyed the challenge and I still have some beautiful scenery to come. So without further ado, I'm going to get hiking!

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So I took a break about halfway and it hit me that I am only a matter of a few miles away. It seems almost unbelievable to have covered this distance in this time, just walking! I was sitting on a rock thinking of some of the stories that my grandfather used to tell me. I sang a couple of Scottish folk songs by The Corries and talked to a passing sheep. I think it is for the best this is the last day, before I start drawing faces on rocks and calling them Geoff!

The last couple of miles I walked with a couple called Tom and Jess. They were great company and I think it did us all good to have that distraction from the aches and pains. They told me of a coming trip in Iceland (I think) in a couple of weeks. Even I think that is pretty hardcore so soon after the West Highland Way.

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Walking into Fort William on a busy warm day with people everywhere was very overwhelming, having been alone for 7 days. I found a quiet dark table in a corner, and ordered food. A lot of food! Table manners kind of went out of the window when the food arrived, and I ate too quickly. The indigestion was terrible! A beer to wash

it all down helped. Then it was time to head for the bus to Oban to transfer to the trains to Milngavie to get the car. This caused the biggest stoma bag issue, and I can't blame the appliances; it is all about the volume of food! I would have to find somewhere on the way home to do a change.

I didn't remember the journey down to Oban. I must have instantly fallen asleep, with my travel pillow still deflated! Oban was nice; I had an hour to kill there, and sat by the harbour watching the boats doing their thing in the setting sun and a hotel very kindly let me use their accessible toilet to change my bag. Much easier than in the Highland wilds! Such a beautiful place. I made a note to visit there again.

Back at Milngavie there was a mile walk to the car. That was a tough one, but I drove to just outside Glasgow and took some sleep in the car, ready to head home the next day.

## Afterword:

Well it has been a few days since I got back from the trip. I am still a bit sore, and my feet are beaten up and I have a bit of a limp, but otherwise recovering very well. It seems quite surreal being back home and around lots of people.

I was feeling quite anxious about being out and about the first couple of days. I had not really seen that coming. Lots of wonderful messages of support have been sent to me from friends, family and supporters - they really do help.

I had a donation from Tom and Jess, the couple I met on the last day! Such a lovely thing to do, and quite unexpected.





The stunning views made it all worthwhile.

Over £750.00 has been raised for the charity, and I truly hope that what I have done here shows people with and without an ostomy that it is all in the mind. We are stronger than we think and capable of doing so much. It was hard work, but the sense of achievement sitting on that bench at the end was so spectacular. I would definitely do this again, but maybe over a longer time and with less weight!

My stoma bag was not really an issue. It was easy to manage and no more inconvenience than normal. I was really pleased with how well my products held up. It was not an easy challenge with all the movement and heat and rain but it did not take much focus at all.

I will do more of these walks. It was a great thing to do. Now looking forward to meeting some of the folks from the Ileostomy and Internal Pouch Association,

and soon I will be working towards joining them as a volunteer.

I will soon be updating all the Facebook feeds, and I am going to keep the pages going, and use them as general ostomy hiking travel blogs, so do please keep in touch, whether friend, family, supporter or just an interested ostomate. Get outdoors and enjoy those views!

*Ed: On behalf of everybody here at Ileostomy and Internal Pouch Association, I would like to extend our gratitude to Chris for making such a great contribution to the charity! Not only did Chris raise over £750, which will go towards supporting other ostomates, but he has shown that living with a stoma needn't stop you in your tracks - as long as you've got all your equipment of course, and a good pair of walking boots!*

*Find out more about Chris' journey here: [www.facebook.com/Walking100miles](https://www.facebook.com/Walking100miles)*