

Preparation for Climbing Mont Blanc

It will be important to begin a **training regimen** early to prepare yourself for the climb. Chamonix is about 1035m (over 3000 feet elevation), which gives you a little elevation, but will not be enough for total acclimatization to the top of Mont Blanc-4810m (just under 16,000 feet). Fortunately, Chamonix has easy access to some great trails (to be put on this website in April). Some of you will have time constraints before the trip, but **please try to physically prepare before the climb**. I will give you an optimum plan, and another plan that may not afford complete acclimatization, but could get you to the top.

Importantly, you will need **cardiovascular reserve**. This simply means: get in shape. **Aerobic conditioning** is important to success, and will be the majority of energy spent. However, **anaerobic exercise** will give you that extra push as well. Remember that workouts do not give you the ability to acclimatize, unless you exercise at high altitude, preferably around 2000-2500m (6000-7000 feet). This is why Olympic athletes train in Albuquerque and Santa Fe, where we are from.

A disclaimer: make sure that your physician approves of this exercise program (and the climb), especially if you have concurrent illnesses. This program assumes you are healthy, and should be adjusted for your particular health condition.

To give you an idea about the Mont Blanc climb, you will start out around 2500m (over 7000 feet) where the train drops you off. Then you will go on a 5% grade on a nice, but rocky trail with steps. Figure 1-2 hours on this trail. When you get to the ice field, you will do several switchbacks and sometimes will need to scramble up some rocks, anywhere from 1,5 to 2.5 meters tall (4-8 feet approximately), with good holds, with the steepest about 60 to 70 degrees. In some of these steeper areas, cables are available to clip in to, or your guide (if you get one) can rope you up. Sometimes this steeper area becomes a traverse along a good ledge, with hand holds. After a nice snack at the ice field, figure 2-4 hours to the top of the Gouter Refuge at 3800m (12,800 feet). The next day to the summit is a walkup with long ice axe and crampons, with a maximum steepness of maybe 45 degrees. You near the summit on a narrow ridge, and reach the summit about 6 hours later. You need a little reserve to get back to the Refuge (2-3 hours); after a refreshing lunch, you can stay or descend to catch the train back to Chamonix...a nice long day indeed.

Best exercise/acclimatization regimen: 8 weeks. Running up stairs or hills will be the best exercise to enhance aerobic activity, but start easily/walk if you have not jogged up hills. The first time I ever jogged up a mountain was a lesson in painful thighs that just couldn't move another inch. So take it slowly, or run small intervals-maybe hills that are 200 feet (75m) high at a nice jogging pace, then jogging down the hill for recovery. Do this 5-10 times, three times the first week, and gradually increase your distance by 100% for 10 reps the next week, or 200% for 5 reps, and 400% for a continuous run or brisk walk the third week, again doing these sessions 3 times a week. Whether you do the repetitions or a continuous run, do so for 30 minutes to get your heart rate at 70% of your predicted maximum (maximum=220-minus age in years). Please note that if this is a bit much, begin by walking up hills with your ski poles for at least 30 minutes to get your heart rate at 70% of your predicted maximum (maximum=220-minus age in years).

For the fourth week, continue this program; or if you are ambitious, increase your distance uphill hiking or jogging for a 45 minute session. If you are at this point and cannot jog up a hill, put 10-20 kg (20-45 pounds) in your backpack, starting at lower weights and increasing gradually. "Titrate" this activity to 70-80% of your predicted maximal heart rate. This week would be a

good week to introduce an elevation gain: if you live at sea level, take a recovery walk with family or friends at a 2000m (6000 foot elevation) for a couple of hours at 50% of maximal predicted heart rate. If you live near this elevation, go another 1000m (3000 feet) higher than where you reside. You might be ambitious enough to have a picnic or camp. Take along some ibuprofen or acetaminophen (paracetamol) if you get headaches, and hydrate well.

In your fifth week, continue your regimens for an hour (if you jog) or 1.5 hours (if you hike). If you jog, take another day and hike with a backpack with weights for at least 1.5 hours. If you can, introduce a little anaerobic stress to a workout on a separate day: run sprints or “fast hikes” (preferably up hills) as an interval workout. Choose a distance, say 100 meters or yards, where you can go at a rate of 50% of your maximal speed, then 60%, then 75%, then 90% of your speed, and then go all out at 100%. Remember that if you go up one way, you have to return from where you started from each time to start the next interval. This return to the start is your recovery phase, where you just jog or walk to “cool down” a bit and get the heart rate down. To finish, the reverse: exercise at 90%, then 75%, 60%, then 50%. You will be quite done, but doing this in the next weeks 1-2 times a week is worth it. The sprints will get your heart rate at about 90% of max. If you can, take a short brisk walk for 15 minutes the next day to recover. If you can, go to elevation this week.

In your sixth and seventh week, you can increase your exercise times to 1.5-2 hours, with an interval session once or twice that week. One of the three aerobic sessions can take place at altitude, but don't exercise with the same intensity. If you can, plan a trip each week to an elevation of 3000-3500m (about 10,000-12,000 feet). This is easily done if you live in the US West Coast; perhaps a challenge for others (if this is your case, coming to Chamonix a week earlier can help).

Continue the same for the eighth week...if you are lucky, take advantage of climbing a “fourteener” in place of an interval AND aerobic workout. These eight weeks assume that you do not consistently exercise all year long. It may seem intense, but will help lots! If you feel that you are too sedentary, begin a moderate program with weights 1-2 months in advance, bike, swim, hike, whatever. Stair stepping or using a Nordic Track would also be beneficial. Some of you do other sports: I recommend limiting these in deference to exercise more specific to the climb, if you are able to. If you live near us, we will be taking advantage of some acclimatization hikes: call us for details.

“Executives” (cram session) exercise/acclimatization regimen: one week. Hiking with weights will be your best bet as described, with two trips to 3000m (9000 feet). I heartily recommend you arrive a week earlier in Chamonix to accomplish this. Take courage however: I have seen many people climb in the Alps even without acclimatizing. These are not the Reinhold Messners of Chamonix, either; they somehow get to the top, sometimes with a restless night at the refuge and a headache in the morning!

Keep in mind that this is not a technically difficult climb, but it would behoove you to learn to utilize simple ice axe techniques and crampon techniques to help you prepare, or to stop, if you slide. We will be in Albuquerque to give you some instruction if you desire (while there is snow), or you may take instruction elsewhere, or in Chamonix (before the course).