



*the national
voice
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hikers*

PLAYING IT SAFE ON THE TRAIL

Preparation is the Key to a Fun and Safe Hike

A trip into the wild country need not be any more dangerous than a stroll through our own backyards. But for some people, the very element that draws many of us to the backwoods also conjures alarm: the unknown. Fortunately our fear of unknown terrain and potential mishaps that may be lurking on the trail ahead can be tempered with one necessary tool—common sense. Whether preparing for a short day-hike or a week long adventure in the country, common sense must be foremost in your safety strategy.

When getting ready for a hike, plan ahead, be prepared and take steps to prevent problems before they occur. Although we couldn't possibly describe every incident you might encounter in the woods—after all, the unknown is part of the adventure—the following are some basic steps for using common sense to promote safety on the trail, and ultimately enjoy your hike more.

Plan Ahead. Learn about the area you plan to visit before you get there. Where are the water sources along your route and what is known about their quality? What kind of wildlife inhabit the area? Contact the local land managers for information and safety concerns specific to the area you plan to explore. Review maps to learn the general lay of the land and familiarize yourself with prominent landmarks and terrain features. Once you've planned your route, including alternate routes and back-up camping destinations, leave your itinerary, including the time you expect to return, with a friend and with the local park or forest ranger.

Be Prepared. Part of being prepared for a hike is being physically capable and knowing your own limits. If your idea of regular exercise is a trip from the couch to the ice box, attempting a three-day trek along the Appalachian Trail is not common sense. To get yourself physically prepared for a hiking adventure, begin a regular exercise routine that includes aerobic activity and strength workouts. You should always consult a doctor before beginning a fitness program. Remember that other factors, such as lack of sleep, insufficient food, or being too hot or cold, will affect your ability on the trail and may decrease your stamina, strength or coordination. Drugs, medicinal or otherwise, may also have hindering effects including drowsiness, slow reaction time, and impaired judgment.

What about the Weather? Pay close attention to current weather conditions and unique topography. What are the low and high temperatures for that season? Will you encounter snow or other severe weather conditions? When is the prime season for mosquitoes, black flies, or other pests that will take a bite out of you and your enjoyment if not properly reckoned with?

Dress Your Best. Your hike will be more enjoyable and safer if you wear the proper clothing. Synthetic or natural fibers, not cotton, are best for allowing your skin to breathe but a poly-blend will dry faster. You can regulate your body temperature by dressing in layers. When you stop to rest in cool weather, put on a sweater or jacket to avoid chills. Long sleeves and full length pants will protect you from sun, briars and insects. Finally, be sure to travel with a hat, which will help you retain body heat in the winter and shield you from other outdoor hazards, like insects and sunburn.

Temperature Troubles. If you must be in the sun, cover exposed skin with sunscreen and wear sunglasses. Remember, even on cloudy days, the sun's rays can still be strong. Also be aware that heat exhaustion, caused by prolonged physical exertion in hot temperatures, can afflict even the most physically fit. If this does occur, cool down by whatever means available. Have the person rest and drink lots of fluids.

Bad Weather. Always plan for bad weather, even if your day starts out nice, by bringing a rain coat or jacket for cool weather. Particularly in high mountain areas, the weather can change rapidly. Typically, lightning storms occur in the afternoons, so begin your hike early, and be prepared to turn back and descend below the ridge tops should an electrical storm start.

Finding Your Way. Always carry a map and compass with you whenever you hike. And learn how to use them before you head off into the wilderness—otherwise, they won't do you much good. Once you start your hike, stay on the blazed trail if trails are marked. Otherwise, be aware of your surroundings and make mental notes of unique landmarks so you'll remember them on your way back.

Feet First. Hiking boots or good sturdy walking shoes are a must. Avoid painful blisters by breaking in your boots or shoes before your hike. Walk around in them for several days, or wear them to work or to the store a few times. Two pairs of socks, one lightweight inner sock and a heavy outer sock, are strongly recommended.

The Company You Keep. Although it's best not to hike alone, try to limit your group to less than 10 people. In fact, some areas require you to register your group prior to starting your hike. When hiking with a group, establish a leader, a sweep and a plan of action for forks in the trail or a change of direction. For example, you may decide the leader will wait at all forks until the entire group is present. Make sure everyone in your group knows the destination. Don't leave the trail without asking a fellow hiker to wait for your return. If only one person has first aid knowledge, that person should be at the end of the group.

First Aid. Pack a first-aid kit whenever you hike. Make sure it's fully stocked (restock it after every hike) and everything is clearly labeled. You should have plenty of bandages, antiseptic, burn treatment, sun screen, insect bite treatment, and scissors or tweezers. It's a good idea for at least one person in your group to have first-aid training or equivalent.

Food and Water. Always carry an extra day's worth of food, because you'll eat more than you think. Remember, you burn a lot of calories on the trail and will get hungry fast. Think before you drink. Even if it appears clean, all backcountry water should be considered contaminated and be treated before drinking, either by boiling, using a purification system, or using a chemical disinfectant filter. It is also important to drink before you feel thirsty to avoid dehydration.

Slippery When Wet. Next to hypothermia, stream crossings take more backpackers' lives than any other cause. It's best to cross on a log or rocks, but if you must wade and the water is more than ankle deep, cross with a rope, if you have a safe means to set the rope in place. If not, use a triangle of people supporting each other or use a sturdy stick for support. Never face downstream. Stand or walk with your legs and body sideways to the current. And only move one foot or other means of support (stick or other person) at a time. It is also prudent to undo your hip belt and sternum strap on your backpack.

Poisonous Plants. A good common rule is, "Leaves of three, then let it be!" Both poison ivy and poison oak fit this description. Another rule of the trail is, "Berries white - poisonous sight." This fits ivy and oak as well as poison sumac. If in doubt, assume the plant is harmful. If exposed, wash immediately with soap and water.

Insects. Avoid poisonous insects known to live in your hiking area. Ask a ranger what to look for before you start your hike. Don't place your hands or any other part of your body in a place you cannot see, such as under rocks, bushes, logs or tents. Carry insect repellent for flies and mosquitoes. When hiking in a heavily wooded or grassy area, check often for ticks. If you do find one, remove it immediately by taking hold of its head and gently pulling. Ticks usually release their hold at once. Make sure all parts have been removed.

Trail Essentials. Finally, before you start your hike, make sure you have these essentials:

- _____ Boots or sturdy shoes (Make sure they're broken in to prevent blisters)
- _____ Wool or synthetic socks (Take at least one extra pair)
- _____ Long-sleeved shirt or sweater, preferably synthetic material (fleece) or wool
- _____ Long pants or convertible pants
- _____ Raingear (parka, jacket, and pants)
- _____ Hat or other protective covering to shield head from insects, sun, or to retain heat
- _____ Day Pack
- _____ Large trash bag to use as shelter or ground cover (and to carry out your garbage)
- _____ Water bottles or hydration packs/bags, at least 2 quarts per person a day
- _____ Food (Meals & extra energy-boosting snacks like candy bars, energy bars, crackers, dried fruit)
- _____ Sunglasses and Sunscreen
- _____ Pocket knife (Ideally, it should have at least one cutting blade, can opener, and scissors)
- _____ Waterproof matches, fire starter
- _____ First Aid Kit
- _____ Whistle
- _____ Emergency blanket
- _____ Flashlight or headlamp with extra batteries and light bulb
- _____ Map and Compass or GPS unit (new weather tracking instruments can also be useful)
- _____ Insect Repellent

If you're staying overnight, add:

- _____ Backpack
- _____ Sleeping Bag
- _____ Sleeping Pad
- _____ Ground Cloth
- _____ Tarp or Tent & Accessories
- _____ Tent Repair Kit
- _____ Stove, Fuel & Accessories
- _____ Cooking Pots & Accessories
- _____ Eating Utensils
- _____ Food Containers
- _____ Toilet Articles
- _____ Trowel (for digging latrine)

Materials contained in this fact sheet are for informational purposes and are not intended to be a sole or complete point of reference for preparedness and safety in the outdoors.

Sources used in preparing this document include:

Hiking and Backpacking: A Complete Guide by Karen Berger, W.W. Norton & Company, New York, 1995.

Wild Country Companion by Will Harmon, Falcon Press Publishing Company, Inc., Helena, Montana, 1994.

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