

Six Good Backpacking Habits

Contributed by Steve Gillman
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1. Foot Care

Blisters and other foot problems are not always just painful inconveniences. If they happen far enough into a trip they can slow your hike out to the point where food runs short or you just can't continue. You may know how to treat a blister or trench foot, but good habits can prevent these from ever happening.

Make stopping several times daily to air out your feet a part of your routine. Take off your shoes and socks and set them in the sun. Pull out your insoles if you can. Soak your feet in a cold stream if they are very hot, but be sure the skin is entirely dry before putting the shoes back on. Change socks if necessary, and let the wet pair hang from the pack to dry. Cover "hot spots" with moleskin before they become blisters. This regular attention to your feet may seem time consuming, but it will allow you to travel more miles more safely.

2. Water Planning

Dehydration is always a possibility when hiking in the wilderness. It is dangerous in hot weather and it can even lead to hypothermia in cold (we need enough fluids for our bodies to heat themselves properly). Plan ahead so you never get the point of being thirsty and without water.

Carry two water bottles, and develop the following good backpacking habit. Anytime you cross a stream or are near a water source, if one water bottle is less than half full, finish it off and fill it. If you are using a water treatment chemical like iodine, while it does its job you will still have the other bottle full of water. If there is a long stretch coming without opportunities to collect water, drink up both water bottles if practical, and fill them both. Also be sure to start each trip fully hydrated. One more habit is to watch your urine. Unless you are taking vitamin pills it will usually only be bright yellow when you aren't drinking enough fluids.

3. Watch The Weather

It is a good habit to watch the weather reports before you go backpacking. You can get the forecast for anywhere in the world now online. But you also should be looking at that sky from time to time, and be aware of any changes. It is common to have lightning almost every afternoon in some mountain areas, for example. If the trail you are on is heading up high and you see the clouds forming, you might want to wait where you are until after the storms.

Learn to observe the skies in the direction where the weather is coming from, and also where it will affect you. If the streams you are crossing are fed by the mountains in the distance, and you see heavy rain clouds there, you might soon see a rise in water levels. Also, if you see the whole sky clearing out at sunset, you may be in for a cold night. Learn and observe.

4. Cell Phones

When backpacking, it's a good habit to fully charge your cell phone before you leave. Then turn it off. The primary reason to even bring it is to have a way to call for help. Preserve the batteries for just such an event. It's not fun to continually

hear the phone ringing in the wilderness anyhow.

5. GPS

If you have a GPS unit, put fresh batteries in it before every trip. Then "mark" your car or the trailhead just before you hit the trail. A GPS can walk you right back to the vehicle if you remember to enter it as a landmark. Otherwise, it may not help much to just know your coordinates.

6. Leave An Itinerary

One of the backpacking habits most important to your safety, is to let someone you trust know where you will be and when you expect to return. That way if all else fails, help will be sent out there to look for you. Just be sure to notify that person as soon as you do return, so they don't think you are still out in the wilderness.

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