

Safety Tips: Hiking and Camping

Know the Rules

- Learn about regulations for the area(s) you plan to visit - including campfire rules, dog and pet regulations, and wildlife guidelines. Some areas require reservations or permits or may have other restrictions. First check with a park ranger. Find out in advance about any regulations and get current maps of the area(s).

Wildlife and Avoiding Danger

- Learn the types of wildlife to expect in the area by calling the ranger station or searching the web.
- Learn to identify poisonous snakes that may be found in the area, and know first aid treatment in the unlikely event a bite occurs.
- Know what precautions to take to protect your food and equipment from bears and other animals (day or night.)
- If poison oak is likely to be present in the area you visit, plan ahead by adding a topical poison oak treatment or soap to your equipment.
- Make sure your equipment is in good shape and make any repairs before your trip. If you plan to use a new tent or you have not used it for a while, set the tent up completely to make sure all the stakes and poles are included and look for any rips or separated zippers.

Medical, First Aid and Emergencies

- If you have any medical conditions, check with your health care provider for approval.
- Pack more prescription and over-the-counter medication that you might need if your trip is unexpectedly extended.
- Open your first aid kit and become familiar with its contents. Check for contents that have expired and supplement the kit with additional adhesive bandages and sterile pads of various sizes.
- Review the skills, equipment and supplies that you'll need for the recreational activities you're planning. Take advantage of the many available books and websites to learn camping and outdoor skills.
- Find out about the physical conditioning required and get in shape before your trip.

Equipment and Safety

- Check the weather before you leave. Make sure your equipment is appropriate for the weather expected. Always pack cold weather gear in the event the weather changes, even in summer. Temperatures are often unexpectedly cold if you are not used to camping or being in the outdoors. Always allow for bad weather and for the possibility that you may be forced to spend a night outdoors unexpectedly.
- Bring extra garbage bags to pack out any refuse you come across.

- It's safest to hike or camp with at least one companion. If you plan to hike into a remote area, have a minimum of four people in your group. If someone is hurt, someone else can stay with the person who's hurt while two others go for help.
- Pack emergency signaling devices and find out the location of the nearest ranger station in case of an emergency.
- Leave a copy of your itinerary with a family member or friend. Include details like the make, year, and license plate of your car and when you plan to return. Also include emergency contact information for the ranger station or other agency that might be called on by your friend or family member to check on your welfare or reach you in case of an emergency.
- Check your vehicle before the trip. Make sure it's in good condition for the mountainous or desert road conditions you'll encounter. Ensure that tires have a good tread and that your spare has adequate air. Replace your battery if it is beginning to show signs of low cranking power. Double check your auto insurance towing policy.
- Expect no cell phone service in remote areas and plan accordingly.

What to Bring

- What you take will depend on where you're going and how long you plan to be away.
- Here are some essentials: plenty of water and purification tablets or filters; first aid kit; a whistle; any needed medications; sunscreen; radio with extra batteries; map, pocket knife, signal mirror, cell phone; candles and matches in a waterproof container; flashlight; sunglasses and a hat for sun protection; insect repellent; extra clothing, like extra sox (to prevent blisters, avoid cotton sox) and rain gear; maps and compass; extra food; nylon filament, extra pair of prescription glasses; space blanket; trash bags, which can be used as ponchos or ground cover.
- Carry out what you carry in.

At the campsite

- Arrive early so you have plenty of time to check your campsite and set up camp before dark.
- Check your site for any potential hazards (such as ant beds, poison oak, nearby cliffs, etc.) Show all members in your party – even the youngest children – what poison oak looks like and where it is likely to be around your camp and the paths to the restrooms, creeks and other frequently used locations near your campsite. Make sure everyone in your party knows what the potential hazards are in the area and how to avoid them.
- Make sure your tent is at least 15 feet upwind from grills and fires. Maintain at least a three-foot clear area around the tent, free from leaves and dry grass. Do not dig drainage channels or trenches around your tent or campsite. They are not effective at directing rainwater away from your tent and can become unexpected tripping hazards.
- Use only battery operated lights in or near tents or campers and never use heaters which emit carbon monoxide inside your tent or camping vehicle.
- Mark tent stakes, poles and guy lines with bright fabrics or tennis balls to avoid tripping.
- Dispose of trash properly and utilize recycle bins where available.
- Campfires
- Only build fires in designated fire pits and make sure fires are always attended.
- Keep a shovel – even a small camp shovel – near the fire so it's available to use to throw dirt on the campfire. Keep a bucket of water near the fire to help extinguish it when necessary.

- Know where the nearest water faucet is located to refill the bucket after use.
- Supervise children at all times when fires are burning or grills are in use. Do not allow children to run or play around the fire ring, even when the fire is not lit.
- When near campfires, wear snug fitting clothing and be sure everyone knows how to put out a clothing fire – stop, drop and roll.
- Thoroughly extinguish all fires.

Hiking Tips

- Bring a basic first aid kit (with bandages, gauze, disinfectant, surgical tape.)
- Prepare yourself in advance by taking a first aid safety course.
- Make sure family members or friends have your itinerary and have them contact the park if you don't return within a reasonable time.
- Check the weather before you go and be prepared for any changes.
- Carry a current park trail map and know how to read it.
- Wear shoes or boots that provide good ankle support. Slick leaves on trails have been known to cause fractured ankles.
- Take adequate water – a minimum of two quarts per person per day. If hiking in arid climates, carry at least four quarts per person per day. All water from the backcountry should be treated either by filtering or boiling. Expect backcountry water sources to be unavailable and have a contingency plan in that event.
- Be prepared to send distress signals (with a flashlight or using the sun's rays with a shiny object)
- Remember there is safety in numbers. Group hikes are a great way to protect you from hiking dangers and they are more fun. Consider joining a hiking club.
- Avoid hypothermia, the dangerous lowering of body temperature, by keeping dry. Dress in layers that can be removed or added as you heat up or cool down. Always carry a wind resistant jacket and rain gear. Get out of any wet clothes. Get into your sleeping bag or fill a trash bag with leaves and get into that. On warm days, watch for signs of heat exhaustion. If you get lost, be sure to keep warm.
- Be aware of possible encounters with wild animals and treat any encounters with extreme caution.
- After you return home
- Repair any equipment that was worn or damaged during your trip so it is ready for the next one. Replace any non-perishable items you used, such as matches and candles, and first aid supplies.
- Make note of the things you forgot, wished you had brought, or didn't bring enough of.
- Keep your notes on file to review before your next trip.
- Make notes of what you learned about your camping and hiking locations and things you want to see or do on your next trip to the area. Attach the notes to the park map for future easy reference.