

The Safety Factor

Cross streams carefully. Study them before starting across because the point where the trail stops may not be the safest route. Slower, wider water may be deeper but it can be easier to walk through. Water usually moves most swiftly at its narrowest point. Always loosen your shoulder straps and hip belt before fording, so you can throw off your pack if you get into trouble. Use your hiking staff or a stout stick as another leg; it will give you better balance when wet, slippery rocks are underfoot.

To reduce the dragging effect of swift currents, take off excess clothing if the weather is warm. In cold weather, close-fitting long underwear will help keep you warm. To prevent slipping and to protect your feet, wear your boots, or switch to tennis shoes if they have good tread. Before venturing into the water remove your socks, then put them on after you cross. Take each step slowly and deliberately. Your forward foot should be firmly planted before moving your rear foot. Never hurry.

Pack a good first-aid book and kit. Before your trip, become familiar with the recommended treatments for common hiking injuries.

Wear a watch because if the sky becomes overcast and the sun is obscured, darkness may catch you still on the trail. You don't want to be searching for your camp, or worse, a campsite, in the dark.

Carry a whistle so you can signal for help if there is an emergency.

To guard against heat exhaustion and heat stroke:

Consume plenty of water because on hot days, your body can lose about two quarts of fluid per hour. Wear light-colored cotton clothing to reflect the heat. Cotton absorbs moisture from your skin, and as it evaporates, you feel cooler.

Wear sunglasses and a hat with a brim to shade your head. Dip your head in a cool stream, or soak a bandana and wrap it around your head. Both methods will cool you as the water evaporates.

When camping near roads or towns, don't tell locals and non hikers where you plan to sleep. Avoid camping in high-use areas that may be the scene of late-night, drive-up parties.

Purify all water before drinking. There are several ways to do this:

Boil water for 10 minutes. This uses fuel and takes a long time, since the water then has to cool.

Hand-held filters force water through a ceramic strainer for instant purification. There's no aftertaste but they are heavy and expensive. The internal filters become clogged over time and need replacing.

The most popular and effective chemical method is iodine, available in crystals and tablets. Both forms are extremely potent and can be harmful if directions aren't followed carefully. You have to wait five to 20 minutes, depending on the water temperature. Iodine leaves a foul taste in your mouth.

Don't overextend yourself. Fatigue is like a tranquilizing drug; it impairs your judgment, you stumble more, and your reaction time is slower. Never hike more than eight hours a day. Also, many people push too hard when they first hit the trail because they're excited and charged up, but that initial exertion leaves them dragging for the rest of the multi-day trip. Hike no more than five or six hours the first and second days of your trip.

Take precautions to prevent hypothermia, the leading cause of death in the outdoors. It occurs when a body's core temperature drops below 95 degrees F. At this point, the body can't generate warmth, so its temperature continues to fall. Unless the victim is quickly warmed, he eventually will die from exposure. To lessen the chances of hypothermia: eat before you get hungry, rest before you get tired, and if you feel a slight chill, put on more clothes -- don't wait until you're cold and shivering.

Watch out for each other because one of the earliest signs of hypothermia is confused thinking. Many victims aren't aware of their condition and will say they feel fine. Watch for incoherent, slurred speech, violent fits of shivering, drowsiness, and exhaustion. If someone shows signs of hypothermia, stop hiking, get out of the wind and rain, and conserve the victim's energy. Give him hot drinks but no alcohol (it's a depressant and he should be kept awake), coffee, or tea (diuretics, which cause loss of body fluids). Get him into warm, dry clothing.

Build a fire, or fill water bottles or canteens with hot water and place them against the chilled person. Give him high-energy foods to quickly resupply bodily fuel. If necessary, the victim and someone else should remove

heavy clothing and crawl into a dry sleeping bag together; one person's body warmth can save another's life.

If the weather is warm and your load heavy, take your boots and socks off frequently for 10- to 15-minute breaks. It will feel marvelous and will help keep your feet dry; moisture causes blisters.

The first sign of a developing blister is a hot and tender spot, so take action immediately and apply moleskin before it gets to the full-blown stage. If a blister develops, draining it will increase comfort and hasten healing.

Puncture the skin with a sterilized needle (hold it over a match). Let the fluid drain, apply an antibiotic cream, then cover with a non-stick bandage. Put moleskin or Second Skin (available at drug stores in the foot care section) over the bandage.

Prepare for the worst. Always carry enough clothing for the worst possible weather during the time of year you're hiking. Don't rely on optimistic weather reports.

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