



---

## Woods and Camping Safety for the Whole Family

Planning a safe family camping trip can be an enjoyable experience if you are prepared. Knowing your limits, taking the time to plan ahead, and packing the right items will help your adventure go off without a hitch. Read on to get the down-and-dirty basics of woods and camping safety.

### Planning Ahead

If you are not skilled in the outdoors, begin your adventures by taking day trips. But even during day trips, you have to be aware of camping safety issues, such as insect bites and stings; plants that may cause rashes and allergic reactions; exposure to heat, wind, water, and cold; and getting lost.

Once families feel comfortable with their camping skills, they may want to spend a planned few days or a week in a wilderness park. So before you head into the wild, gather information from park rangers, read guide books about the terrain and weather, and talk with campers who've been where you want to go.

### Common Camping Dangers

One common mistake made by camping families is not being ready for seasonal transitions in terms of proper clothing and equipment. Storms blow in and out during all seasons, and there can be sudden shifts in temperatures in spring and fall, particularly on high mountains. Precipitation and wind leads to rapid cooling, especially at nightfall when temperatures drop.

Excessive heat can be a problem for young children, whose sweat glands are not fully developed until adolescence. On hot days, hike in the cooler mornings and evenings. During the day, spend time in shaded areas. When you or your child is exposed to the sun, wear skin protection including hats, sunscreen, and cotton clothes.

Another common problem is getting lost. Teach your children how to recognize landmarks at the campsite and on hikes. While hiking, encourage them to turn around and look at the trail to familiarize themselves with their surroundings. Teach children to remain where they are and stay calm if they are lost. Children should wear whistles (whistles can be heard farther away than the human voice) and know the universal help signal of three blows or loud sounds. Before your trip, take a course on map reading and finding directions. For wilderness trekking, always carry a topographical map and compass.

### Proper Clothing

To protect against sudden temperature and weather changes, wear multi-layered clothing made of polypropylene, wool, and cotton. Layers of clothing such as tank tops, long-sleeved shirts, and sweaters will allow you or your child to reduce or increase clothing as needed. To protect against rain and wind, bring breathable, lightweight waterproof jackets and pants.

All family members need comfortable hiking shoes to prevent blistering. When hiking, tuck pant cuffs into socks and boots to protect against ticks. Children should wear brightly colored

clothes to increase visibility. Caps or hats are also a good idea to guard against the sun and protect children's heads from insects.

## Setting Up a Campsite

At campgrounds that can be accessed by cars, many natural hazards such as forest fires and fallen trees are less likely to be encountered. But there are other dangers such as broken glass, discarded needles, and other hazardous trash. Scout the area before setting up a tent. In wilderness areas, look for signs of animal and insect use of the area; for example, yellow jacket wasps build their nests in the ground. If berries are plentiful at a site, bears may forage for food there. To build a firepit, look for a clearing and previous firepits. During fire-hazard periods and dry seasons, use portable stoves rather than campfires.

## Drinking the Water

Assume that all wilderness streams and creeks are potentially contaminated water sources due to domestic and wild animals. *Giardia lamblia*, a common parasitic contaminant, can cause nausea, bloating, gas, stomach cramps, and explosive diarrhea. If you are unable to bring bottled water with you on your trip, iodine is an inexpensive and easy way to purify water (you can purchase iodine tablets that dissolve in the water). You can also use water filters. Boiling is acceptable, but takes a lot of time, energy, and resources; also, appropriate boiling times are uncertain because boiling points vary according to elevation.

## Food Supplies and Foraging

Plan your meals according to how many days you will be on a trip, and then bring extra food. These days there are plenty of portable foods, such as granola bars, packaged trail mix, breads, peanut butter, fruit, and other camping-friendly foods. You can even purchase dehydrated meals that only require the addition of water. It's best to leave foraging for berries to the animals, because it's easy to mistake toxic berries for edible ones that can make someone pretty sick and ruin the entire trip.

## Plants and Insects

Common plants to be wary of are poison oak, sumac, and ivy. Your best bet is to avoid touching any unknown plants, and dress your children in long-sleeved shirts and pants to protect the skin from exposure to plants that may cause allergic reactions. There are also products available that you can apply before your hike, that will act as a protective barrier against the oils of the plants. Any area that comes in contact with a poisonous plant should be washed immediately with soap and cold water. Hydrocortisone cream (1%) will sometimes successfully stop the rashes and blistering associated with poison ivy.



Antihistamines taken by mouth are effective for allergic reactions or rashes ranging from contact with poison ivy to mosquito bites to bee and wasp stings. Use citronella-based products to repel insects and put it on clothing instead of skin whenever possible. Repellents containing DEET can also be used. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that products for children contain no more than 10% DEET. DEET-containing products may be used on children older than 2 years.

Another camping concern is ticks, which can carry several types of infections, including Lyme disease. Check your child at the end of each day for ticks. Be sure to check in places like behind the ears, under the arms, and in the groin area, where ticks like to hide. Be aware of the typical rash of Lyme disease - a red ring about 2 inches in diameter around the bite appearing a few days after infection.

## Protecting Against Animals

Teach your children that animals in the wild are strong and agile, and will defend themselves and their young if threatened. Children should not approach wild animals, even small ones, and should **never** feed them. Don't leave your children unsupervised - small children are vulnerable. Instruct your children to stay calm and call loudly for help if they encounter a wild animal.

Always ask the park rangers about wild animals in your wilderness park. Keep the campsite free of food odors and do not bring food into tents. Pack food in your cars overnight; if you are going on a long camping trip, pack food in resealable plastic bags and animal-resistant containers.

## What to Pack

Essentials for every camping trip include:

- map of the area
- compass
- flashlight with extra batteries and bulbs
- extra food
- extra clothing, including raingear
- first-aid kit
- sunglasses and sunscreen
- pocketknife
- matches in waterproof container
- candle or fire starter
- adequate supply of clean drinking water
- appropriate insect repellents

Other necessary items include: full water bottles for hikes; a waterproof and lightweight tent; ground insulation for sleeping; a blanket for emergencies; signaling device such as a whistle, mirror, pocket flare, or cell phone; duct tape; and 50 to 100 feet of nylon rope.

Bring a first-aid kit and take a first-aid and CPR course to know how to use its contents. Your first-aid kit should include the following items:

- adhesive and butterfly bandages
- self-adhesive roller bandages
- sterile gauze pads
- large wound dressings
- blister dressings
- nonadhesive dressings
- cloth-based adhesive tape
- elastic bandages (Band-Aids)
- thermometer
- latex gloves
- large plastic bag
- safety pins
- scissors
- tweezers and needles (to remove splinters or ticks)
- topical antibiotic cream (such as Neosporin)
- oral antihistamine (such as Bendadryl)
- medications for pain or fever, such as acetaminophin (Tylenol) or ibuprofen (Motrin)
- hydrocortisone cream (1%)
- alcohol pads

In addition, bring a liquid antiseptic soap to clean wounds. Don't forget extra protective dressings for severe arm or leg blisters. Knowing how to make a splint in case of injury is also useful and can be learned in first-aid classes.

## Camping Emergency Basics

In the case of an emergency, the most important thing to do is to remain calm. During an emergency, families need to decide together on the best plan of action, examining the resources available. Before your trip, notify friends and families of your destination and time of return. And sign up at park registers before and after wilderness treks. If you've provided your child with a whistle and instructed him or her to wait in a sheltered area if he or she is lost, you should be able to find him or her more readily. If your family has a cell phone, bring it along - and make sure it's charged.

Always stay on the safe side when setting boundaries for family camping; the more remote you are, the more care you should take in choosing your activities. Survey campsites for riverbanks and cliffs. Check out climbing trees for dead branches and moss, both of which cause falls. Children can learn about the world around them while exploring the outdoors, and you can continue to enjoy camping and the woods safely.

Updated and reviewed by: Barbara Homeier, MD

Date reviewed: January 2005

Reviewed by: Kate Cronan, MD

---

[About Us](#) / [Contact Us](#) / [Partners](#) / [Editorial Policy](#) / [Privacy Policy & Terms of Use](#)



Note: All information on KidsHealth is for educational purposes only. For specific medical advice, diagnoses, and treatment, consult your doctor.

©1995-2006 The Nemours Foundation. All rights reserved.