



SWS Mountain Guides

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Some Backpacking General Information Food, Feet, Drink, Hygiene, Altitude, Attitude and You

We go to the mountains for many reasons but a common one for most people is the adventurous nature of the experience. But the same variables that contribute to the feelings of joy and excitement we can get in the mountains, can also cause problems and discomfort if not taken into account by those planning an adventure into the backcountry world. This brief overview of some of the more important issues concerning the health and safety of all hikers and their impact on the mountains is provided to help you take more control over your own well being while on your trip.

Altitude: As altitude is gained and the atmospheric pressure drops there is less available oxygen in the air. The percentage of oxygen remains the same but there is less per given volume. At 18,000 feet the atmospheric pressure and the pressure of oxygen in the air is only half that at sea level. (Good thing we are not going to 18,000 ft.) Our bodies undergo complex, and as yet not fully understood changes, to compensate for the lack of oxygen. At moderate heights (8,000'-10,000') most people coming from sea level start to notice shortness of breath that can progress to tiredness, headache, and flu-like symptoms. Usually this will subside after a day or two at altitude. At higher elevations these problems can be much more severe.

It takes longer than the length of most trips to fully acclimate to altitude but there are a few things you can do to facilitate the process: 1) Spend the night before your trip begins at the trailhead campground or lodge. About 6,000 ft. elevations seems to be optimum for most people. This gives you a head start with the altitude. 2) Try and be well rested, fed and hydrated at the start of your trip. 3) Avoid alcohol and other drugs immediately before and during your trip. 4) Drink lots of water and reduce caffeine intake.

5) Pace yourself, breathe. Slow and steady is the way to go.

Hydration: How much water do you think you drink in a typical day at home or work? Most of us need to drink at least 4-6 quarts in a day of climbing or hiking; more on a hot day. That's a lot more than most people drink in the city, but drinking enough water is the easiest thing you can do to avoid problems with altitude, fatigue, heat and cold. Dehydration is a contributing factor in almost all health problems in the mountains. Do not include caffeine or alcoholic drinks when gauging your fluid intake. They actually dehydrate your body. We encourage the use of the new "Sports Drinks" – they do help replace lost electrolytes, and besides, they make the water you need to drink more appealing – something that's important in a situation where natural hunger and thirst responses are suppressed. See below.

Food: When SWS provides the food, there are no decisions to be made – we know how much and what kind of foods are best for each type of activity. But if you are bringing snacks and/or lunches, there are some important choices to consider. Contrary to the popular image of increased appetites in the "Great Outdoors", most people experience diminished appetites at the increased altitudes of most of our seminars. Though your body is working much harder and using up to 4,000-6,000 calories a day, or roughly twice the normal expenditure, many times you just won't feel like eating. This is why it's important to make every calorie count. Choose foods that are high in complex carbohydrates, for sustained energy, and have flavors that you strongly like. Remember that this is one place fats are okay. You won't have to worry about gaining weight – many folks lose weight on a trip! Try to eat small amounts frequently – even if you don't feel like it. On our more strenuous trips, you'll get used to your guide urging you to eat, eat, eat. Finger foods work best, so look for whole grain bars, trail mixes (usually labeled "super" or "deluxe"), dried fruit, power bars, energy bars, bagels, hard cheese (yes, it will go bad, but not in the first day or two) and other compact, tasty choices. Go for as much variety as possible, but remember, you've got to eat it or the weight in your pack is just wasted – so forget the jar of peanut butter, bring the shelled peanuts.

Sanitation: Human waste should be disposed of at least 200 feet from trails, camp sites, and water sources. Solid human waste should be buried 6-8 inches underground in mineral soil and toilet paper should be packed out or burned. There are other methods for waste disposal depending on the specific environment; your guide will provide more information.



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Obviously, staying clean in the backcountry is not as easy as it is in the city. Soap has no place in the mountains but individually packaged alcohol towelettes are great for cleaning hands, a task that is just as important in the mountains as it is at home, especially when preparing or handling food.

Foot care: Even perfect feet in the best boots can be prone to problems. A bad blister can ruin a trip, so it's important to fix irritating hot spots before they become serious trouble. Hot spots on your feet, caused by friction between your foot and boot, should be repaired with moleskin when they first appear. Don't worry about slowing down the group to stop; most folks appreciate the break. Come prepared with plenty of moleskin and some Vaseline. A thin layer of petroleum jelly (Vaseline) applied to all potentially troublesome areas is an inexpensive and effective blister prevention technique. It is a bit messy, so be prepared for stained sock liners, but happier feet!

Impact: Our prime directive when in the backcountry is simply to leave it as we found it, maybe even a little bit better. That means: no noodles in the lake bottom, no tent burns in the meadows and no toilet paper strewn about. Wood fires are used only in emergencies; small backpacking stoves are far easier to cook on. When in the mountains, we must remember that we are only visitors passing through a fragile environment.

Packing: If you are in doubt about something on the equipment list or have any questions, please give our office a call. Feel free to take extra items in the car with you. We will be doing a pack check at the trailhead and you can ask your guide then about bringing them along. In the mountains, having the proper equipment can save your life. You must bring all the items on the equipment list. Our guides try to bring some extra gear with them to the trailhead, but they can only do so much. If you fail to bring the proper equipment, Sierra Wilderness Seminars, Inc. reserves the right to send you home without a refund. Also, you will be required to carry your share of the group equipment (food, stoves, tents), so leave some extra room in that pack! As always, give us a call if you have any questions.