



SWS Mountain Guides
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General Information

Food, Feet, Drink, Hygiene, Altitude, Attitude, and More

One of the definitions of adventure is when the outcome of an undertaking is uncertain. By this definition, mountaineering, indeed, qualifies. 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 contributing to the joy and excitement we can get in the mountains can also cause problems and discomfort if not considered by those planning an adventure into the alpine world. This brief overview of some of the more critical issues concerning the health and safety of all hikers or mountaineers and their impact on the mountains will help you take more control over your well-being while on your trip.

Altitude: As altitude gains and the atmospheric pressure drops, oxygen is less available 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 are only half that at sea level. Our bodies undergo complex changes to compensate for the lack of oxygen. At average heights (8,000'-10,000'), most people coming from sea level start to notice shortness of breath that can progress to tiredness, headache, and hangover-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 most trips to acclimate to altitude fully, but there are a few things you can do to facilitate the process: 1) Spend the night before your journey begins at the trailhead campground or lodge—about 6,000 – 8,000 ft. Elevations are optimal for most people. Giving you a head start with the altitude. 1) Try to be well-rested, fed, and hydrated at the start of your trip. 2) Avoid alcohol and other drugs immediately before and during your journey. 3) Drink lots of water and reduce caffeine intake. 4) Pace yourself and breathe. Slow and steady is the way to go.

Hydration: How much water do you drink during 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 hotter days. That's a lot more than most people drink in the city, but drinking enough water is the most natural thing you can do to avoid problems with altitude, fatigue, heat, and cold. Dehydration is a contributing factor to almost all health problems in the mountains. Do not include caffeine or alcoholic drinks when gauging your fluid intake. They dehydrate your body. We encourage using "Sports Drinks" – they help replace lost electrolytes and make the water you need to drink more appealing – necessary in situations where natural hunger and thirst responses are typically suppressed.

Food: When SWS Mountain Guides provides freeze-dried dinners, breakfasts items, and hot drinks, there are decisions to be made on what flavor or type of dinner or breakfast, or hot drink to select – we know how much and what kind of foods are best for each type of activity. You are bringing snacks and lunches; some important choices must be considered. Contrary to the popular image of increased appetites in the "Great Outdoors," most people experience diminished cravings at the increased altitudes of most of our climbs & courses. Though your body is working much harder and using up to 5,000-10,000 calories a day, or roughly twice the regular expenditure, you often won't feel like eating, so making every calorie count is essential. Choose foods high in complex carbohydrates for sustained energy and have flavors 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 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, "Sport" bars, energy bars, bagels, hard cheese, 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 wasted – so forget the jar of peanut butter and bring the shelled peanuts.



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Sanitation: Human waste needs to be disposed of at least 200 feet from trails, campsites, and water sources. Solid human waste should be buried 6-8 inches underground in mineral soil, and your toilet paper should be packed out. Or all human waste will need to be packed out in sensitive areas of our climbs or courses. SWS will provide other waste disposal methods depending on your trip's particular environment and location; your guide will provide more information.

Staying clean in the backcountry is more challenging than in the city. Soap has no place in the mountains, but individually packaged alcohol towelettes or wet wipes are great for cleaning hands, which 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 fixing irritating hot spots is essential 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 moleskins and some Vaseline. An inexpensive and efficient blister prevention technique is a thin layer of petroleum jelly (Vaseline) applied to all potentially troublesome areas. It is messy, so prepare for stained sock liners but happier feet!

The summit is only 49% of the climb... Getting to the top of a mountain can be the easy part of the climb. Now that you're on top, you've to get down, only now you're tired, clouds are building, and napping sounds more like what you'd rather be doing. Remember to budget enough mental as well as physical energy for the descent. Remember, summits only count when you've returned safely to the cars and can tell someone about it!

Impact: Our prime directive in the backcountry is to "Leave No Trace" and leave it as we found it, maybe even better. That means no noodles in the lake bottom, no tent burns in the meadows, and no toilet paper blowing around. Wood fires are used only in emergencies; small backpacking stoves are far easier to cook. When in the mountains, we must remember that we are only visitors passing through a fragile environment. Your guide is a "Leave No Trace" instructor who will instruct you on the proper procedures in your environment. If you have any questions, ask your guide.

Packing: If you need clarification on the equipment list or have questions, please call our office. Feel free to take extra items in the car with you. We will do a pack check at the trailhead or at one of our SWS office locations, where you can ask your guide about items you should bring along. In the mountains, having the proper equipment can save your life. Please bring all the items on the equipment list. Our guides try to bring some extra gear to the trailhead; we have rentals and equipment for sale at our offices, but they can only do so much. If you need to bring the proper equipment, SWS Mountain Guides 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.

Tipping / Gratuities: Tipping is customary on guided trips and is usually between 10% to 20% of the cost of the trip. If you are pleased with the service provided by your guide or instructor and would like to show some additional appreciation, a gratuity is always appreciated.