

Backpacking Tips

Backpack Fit: It's no different to fit a child than an adult. To check the fit, load the backpack and fasten the waist belt just over the hipbones. The shoulder straps' anchor points should be an inch or two below each shoulder crest so the straps wrap over the shoulder a bit. If the straps can't be adjusted that low don't use it. The pack will be miserable to wear. The pack weight should not exceed 1/3 of the body weight of the hiker.

Clothing: Natural fibers (cotton, wool, and down) are best. Dressing in layers makes it easy to regulate your comfort. Long sleeves and full-length pants (not jeans) will protect you from sun, briars, mosquitoes, and ticks. Most of the body's heat is lost through the top of the head so if you are cold, put on a wool or polar fleece hat. Wool sweaters or polar fleece pullovers are better than sweatshirts. Sweatshirts absorb moisture, become very heavy, and wick away body warmth. Wool and polar fleece, when wet, will still keep you warm. Avoid blue clothing because it attracts mosquitoes and black flies.

Sleeping bags: Children have more surface area for their body size than an adult, so they tend to sleep colder. It is easier to vent a bag that is too warm than to make it warmer. Children will usually sleep warmer in a mummy shaped bag than in a roomy rectangular design. There is less air space in a mummy bag that the body needs to heat.

Students should practice rolling up their sleeping bag and putting it in a stuff sack by themselves at home. They will be responsible for breaking down camp several times and they will need to be proficient at this.

Footwear: Hiking boots are a must. The footwear needs to be sturdy and durable. Break in your boots before wearing them on the trip. Walk in them for at least several weeks, wear them to school or out for your training regimen activities. Two pairs of socks, one liner sock (lightweight polypropylene or nylon) and a heavy outer sock are strongly recommended. Many of us prefer wool socks because even when wet, you feet remain warm. Socks should have heels. No tube socks; they fall down and seem to cause blisters. Buy boots in the afternoon after your feet have expanded to get a great fit. Wear the socks you will be using for the trip.

Environmental Conditions:

Hypothermia: Letting your body get too cold is a very serious condition. Your internal body temperature begins to slide downward and without treatment this leads to stupor, collapse, and even death. Prevention is the best treatment. Stay dry, put on rain gear or wool clothes before you start to shiver. Put on a hat!

Sunburn: Cover exposed skin with sunscreen to prevent a burn. Carrying a backpack with sunburned shoulders is not very comfortable.

Insects: Insect repellent should be applied liberally. There are tick sprays on the market, too but any insect repellent that contains DEET should be effective for ticks also. Examples: Cutter, Deep Woods Off, Muskol, and Treo. There are natural alternatives available as well, such as Natrapel and others, which use citronella or other plant based ingredients. Try the type you choose at home to see if any reactions occur.

It is best to use a wet wipe to remove the insect repellent at the end of the day and then reapply, if necessary, the next day.