

Conquering Blisters

By GORP Hiking Expert Karen Berger

Nothing – not rain, nor mosquitoes, not cold, not heat, not even your annoying brother-in-law who someone insisted on bringing along – nothing can derail a perfectly good hike as fast as a niggling little blister, especially when it multiplies in size until it's the only thing you can think of step after miserable step. We've all had them. But what's a walker to do? Is there a way to avoid these annoyances?

You bet.

After suffering my share of hobbled hikes, I decided to see if I could find a solution, I talked to boot reps, questioned my hiking buddies, and tried on enough boots to outfit a centipede. What I learned got me through all 2,158 miles of the Appalachian Trail without a single blister. Here's the scoop:

- **Double check the boot fit.** If you're a beginning backpacker and you're not used to the feel of hiking boots, wear them at home for a couple of days for several hours to be sure they are comfortable. Seek out a reputable store and an experienced salesperson to find the best fit. If you wear them at home and they don't feel right, you can take them back to the store for exchange.
- **Wear wicking socks** - polypropylene or nylon are fine - under a pair of wool-and-nylon blend outer socks. The wicking socks are less abrasive, plus they move moisture away from your feet. Never wear cotton socks- cotton absorbs moisture and practically guarantees blisters.
- **Go easy on the mileage** and keep your pack weight as low as possible.
- **The absolutely number one most important rule of blister prevention:** The second you feel the slightest hint of something rubbing in your shoe, STOP! Ignore your hiking partner's pleas to just keep going. Find the pebble, grass-seed, clump of dirt, grain of sand, or wrinkle in the sock. If it's a tight boot that's causing trouble, rub the inside of your boot with the blunt rounded end of a Swiss army knife to try to stretch the leather or fabric.
- **If you know you've got a vulnerable trouble spot**, like the back of your heel, put a piece of moleskin on it before you start walking.
- **Treat a hot spot with moleskin on the trail.** If a blister has already started forming (it can happen in mere seconds), use a dressing called Second Skin (available from Spenco). This dressing was developed to treat burns – and after all, blisters are nothing more than friction burns. Whether you're putting moleskin over a hot spot or adhesive tape over a Second Skin dressing, remember that tape adheres better to dry skin than wet skin – so use a bandana to dry your sweaty feet first.