



Backpacking: Safety Activity Checkpoints



By some definitions, backpacking entails a low-budget method of travel in just about any part of the globe, particularly in urban areas. By other definitions, backpacking is specific to front-country or back-country environments in parks or wilderness areas. No matter the destination, a backpacker's primary mission is to explore on foot, while carrying all her gear in a backpack and being a good steward of the land. These checkpoints focus on preparing for backpacking in remote areas, but the recommendations can be used in urban areas, too. For information about backpacking and backpacking with children, visit [rei.com](https://www.rei.com), [trails.com](https://www.trails.com) or [backpacker.com](https://www.backpacker.com). Backpacking is not recommended for Girl Scout Daisies and Brownies.

Caution: Girls 12 years old and older must follow the Shooting Sports Safety Activity Checkpoints in order to use firearms, and must have both council and parent/guardian permission. Girls are never allowed to hunt, go on high-altitude climbs or to ride all-terrain vehicles or motor bikes.

Know where to backpack. Connect with your Girl Scout council for site suggestions, such as Girl Scout camps. Also, for information about hikes and trips in the United States and national and regional parks, visit [backpacker.com](https://www.backpacker.com) or [trails.com](https://www.trails.com).

Include girls with disabilities. Communicate with girls with disabilities and/or their caregivers to assess any needs and accommodations. Contact national parks to inquire about their accommodations for people with disabilities. To find resources to adapt various sports including backpacking to persons of all abilities visit [Disabled Sports USA](#). To find backpacking programs for youth of various abilities contact [Global Explorers](#) and [Wilderness Inquiries](#).

Backpacking Gear

Backpacking requires various equipment dependent on the length of trip, location, weather, etc. Below is a basic list of required gear but for a comprehensive list go to [rei.com](#).

Required Gear

- Lightweight, layered clothing and outerwear appropriate for weather conditions
- Water bottle or hydration pack (each girl carries at least one quart)
- Nonperishable, high-energy foods such as fruits and nuts
- Wash kit (hairbrush, biodegradable shampoo and soap, toothbrush, toothpaste)
- Flashlight
- Whistle
- First Aid Kit
- Backpack appropriate for size and experience of user
- Sturdy hiking/trail footwear with thick soles (soft-soled shoes to wear on campsite after removing hiking footwear)
- Map and compass or compass and global positioning system (GPS)
- Sleeping bag and sleeping pad
- Potable water and water purification supplies to remove potential contaminations from natural water sources; use water filter designed to remove Giardia lamblia (see the “Outdoor Cooking” Safety Activity Checkpoints for purification tips).
- Unbreakable, lightweight knife/fork/spoon combo and bowl and cup
- Portable cook stove and fuel, whenever possible (to reduce the use of firewood)
- Waste-management supplies (toilet paper, garbage bag, plastic trowel to dig cat hole, hand sanitizer)
- Food storage (rope and waterproof bag; check local regulations to find out if a bear-proof canister is required)

Recommended Gear

- Waterproof sunscreen (SPF of at least 15) and lip balm
- Hat or bandana

Prepare for Backpacking

- Communicate with council and parents.** See the Introduction to Safety Activity Checkpoints.
- Girls plan the activity.** See *the Introduction to Safety Activity Checkpoints*. In addition, encourage girls to plan routes, activities, rules for group living, and guidelines for dealing with problems that may arise with other groups of backpackers..
- Obtain backpacking training and arrange for adult supervision.** See *the Introduction to Safety Activity Checkpoints for the recommended adult-to-girl ratios, keeping in mind that Girl Scout Daisies and Brownies do not participate in*

backpacking. In addition, the backpacking adult volunteer has taken council-approved training in backpacking. One adult is in front of the group of backpackers, and the other is in the rear of each group.

- **Compile key contacts.** See *the Introduction to Safety Activity Checkpoints*.
- **Girls share resources.** Encourage girls to make a list of gear and supplies, and determine what items can be shared.
- **Choose an appropriate backpacking route.** The route chosen is within the ability of every person in the group, and the pace accommodates the slowest backpacker. Determine the length of the trip by the backpackers' ages, level of experience and ability, physical condition, nature of the terrain, weight of the load to be carried, the season and weather conditions, the water quantity and quality and the activities planned along the way.
- **Be prepared for primitive campsites.** If backpacking in primitive areas with little to no modern conveniences, observe these standards:
 - Choose and set up campsite well before dark.
 - Use a previously established campsite if available.
 - Make sure the campsite is level and located at least 200 feet from all water sources and below tree line.
 - Avoid fragile mountain meadows and areas of wet soil.
 - Avoid camping under dead tree limbs.
 - If a fire is necessary, use existing fire rings when possible. Where no fire ring exists, follow local regulations about ground fires.
 - If a latrine is not available, use individual cat holes—holes for human waste that are at least 200 feet away from the trail and known water sources—to dispose of human waste (visit www.Int.org for more information). Note: cat holes are not permitted in some areas, so follow local sanitary codes in those areas.
 - Do dishwashing and personal bathing at least 200 feet away from water sources.
 - Store food well away from tents and out of reach of animals. Where necessary, hang food at least 10 feet high from a rope stretched between two trees. If the site is in bear country, check with local authorities on precautions to take.
 - See that garbage, tampons, sanitary supplies and toilet paper are carried out.
- **Assess the safety of backpacking sites.** The route is known to at least one of the adults or a report is obtained in advance to assess potential hazards. Ensure that a land-management or similar agency is contacted during the trip-planning stage to help with available routes and campsites, recommended group size, water quantity and quality, and permits (if needed).
- **Assess backpack quality and do a trial run.** Ensure that backpacks and all equipment (including food and water) weigh no more than 20 percent of each person's ideal (not actual) body weight. Guide girls in choosing backpacks, adjusting straps, and taking them on and off. Have the girls plan and conduct a series of conditioning hikes before the backpacking trip.
- **Ensure that backpackers have a comprehensive understanding of the trip.** Group members are trained to be observant of the route, the surroundings, and the fatigue of individuals. Instruction is given on the safety rules for backpacking, such as staying together in a group, recognizing poisonous plants and biting or stinging insects and ticks, respecting wild animals, and behaving effectively in

emergencies. Ensure that girls know how to read maps, use a compass, navigate a route, and estimate distance.

- ❑ **Prepare for emergencies.** Ensure the presence of a waterproof first-aid kit and a first-aider with a current certificate in First Aid, including Adult and Child CPR or CPR/AED, who is prepared to handle cases from extremes of temperature, such as heat exhaustion, heat stroke, frostbite, cold exposure, and hypothermia, as well as sprains, fractures, and altitude sickness. Emergency transportation is available, if possible; if any part of the activity is located 30 minutes or more from emergency medical services, ensure the presence of a first-aider with Wilderness First Aid. See *Volunteer Essentials* for information about first-aid standards and training.
- ❑ **Take safety precautions.** Search-and-rescue procedures for missing persons are written out in advance, reviewed, and practiced by girls and adults. Methods of communication with sources of emergency care, such as police, hospitals, and park and fire officials, are known and arranged in advance.

On the Day of Backpacking

- ❑ **Get a weather report.** On the morning of the activity, check weather.com or other reliable weather sources to determine if weather conditions are appropriate, and make sure that the ground is free of ice. If severe weather conditions prevent the activity, be prepared with a backup plan, alternative activity, or postpone the activity. Write, review, and practice evacuation and emergency plans for severe weather with girls. In the event of a storm with lightning, take shelter away from tall objects (including trees, buildings, and electrical poles). Find the lowest point in an open flat area. Squat low to the ground on the balls of the feet, and place hands on knees with heads between them.
- ❑ **Use the buddy system.** See *the Introduction to Safety Activity Checkpoints*.
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- ❑ **Respect the environment and keep trails clean.** Use principles of minimal-impact camping, a philosophy of respect for the natural environment that involves minimizing environmental and sociological impacts. Store garbage in insect- and animal-proof containers with plastic inner linings, and cover it securely when there is a campsite garbage-pickup service. When there is no garbage-pickup service, remove garbage from campsite in plastic bags and discard, as appropriate. Recycle whenever possible. Do not bury food; carry out all garbage.
- ❑ **Practice safe backpacking.** Hiking off-trail and after dusk is not permitted. The group must hike away from the edges of waterfalls, rock ledges, and slopes with loose rocks.

Backpacking Links

- *Backpacker* magazine: www.backpacker.com
- Trails.com: www.trails.com
- Leave No Trace: www.lnt.org
- Recreational Equipment Inc. (REI): rei.com/learn

Backpacking Know-How for Girls

- **Maximize available backpack space.** What are the absolute necessities? What backpacking gear can girls share? For tips, read trails.com and rei.com/learn.

- **Select ideal energy sources.** Backpackers take rest breaks to drink water and refuel with nutritious, easily digestible, and lightweight foods that don't take up too much space in backpacks. Consider packing nuts, dried fruits, and energy bars.