

Frequently

Women's Hiking

Asked Questions

Answers to women's common hiking questions

BY LAUREN BRADEN

In college I took a class trip to the backcountry of Wyoming for some geology field work. I was not, shall we say, *experienced* in the ways of the great outdoors. Instead of taking us camping, my parents took us to rock concerts. And I dropped out of girl scouts after two just weeks of what I considered to be heavy trauma.

So on the second morning of the trip, when my classmates threatened to leave me behind after catching me shaving my legs in a pristine mountain creek (*with* shaving cream,) I figured this was likely to be my first, and last, wilderness experience.

Boy, was I wrong. I moved to Seattle and caught the hiking bug, and was soon bagging peaks and fording streams. And when I first started out, I had a lot of questions. What do I wear? Where do I go to the bathroom out there? What if I sprain my ankle?

Here we've gathered some of the great and relevant questions that women have about hiking, and sought out some sage advice for the answers. Enjoy!

I want to hike more, but I have few friends into it and will be hiking alone, and I have some hesitation about this. Should I just get over this and go hiking by myself?

Most importantly, you should be comfortable when you're out there. Hiking alone or with company is really a matter of personal preference. Some women choose to hike solo, even when companions may be available, because it is part of the experience they are seeking.

It sounds like in your case you'd prefer to have companions, and there's absolutely nothing wrong with that. Why not start your own informal hiking



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group? (See page 20). The Seattle Backpacking Meetup (<http://backpackers.meetup.com/114/>) is a great way to meet overnight hikers, or link up with hiking companions at www.nwhikers.net.

I am drawn to the idea of doing a solo backpack this summer. Is it safe? Are there any special considerations I should have as a solo backpacker?

Both men and women are drawn to solo hiking for lots of reasons—for me it is the independence and the experience of solitude and connection with my natural environment. I have heard the advice to “never hike alone,” and

you probably have, too. The reality is, regardless of your gender, it's generally safer hiking with a group than going solo. There are additional risks when hiking alone. But are the risks of hiking solo so great that you should not hit the trail alone? I think not.

If you are new to hiking, get some experience under your belt first. Once you feel you're ready to hike solo, go for it, but remember there are extra precautions you need to take as a solo hiker to be safe and comfortable out there.

For starters, don't skip any steps in your pre-hike preparations. Carefully choose your hike and study the route description in a guidebook or online. It's a good idea to choose for your first solo outing

an overnight hike on a trail that you have hiked previously and are somewhat familiar with. Buy a good topographic map and study your route. Before setting out, get a weather forecast. Leave your itinerary with a trusted relative or friend. Before you head to the trailhead, visit a ranger station or visitor center to let them know your itinerary as well. Sign in at the trailhead register.

Pack the right clothes, food and gear for the hike you have chosen. Keep in mind that your pack will probably be heavier because you will be carrying everything and sharing gear weight with no one. With safety first and foremost on your mind, there's a risk of packing too much equipment and food, and your

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safety could actually be compromised if your pack is too heavy for you.

It's a good idea to mentally prepare for any emergency that could occur and how you would handle it on your own, because there will be no one with you to go for help. Practice hanging a bear bag by yourself. Make sure you have a well-stocked first aid kit and all of the ten essentials. And definitely hike with confidence, awareness and surefooting. And have fun!

I need some new boots and a backpack. Should I stick to items specifically designed for women?

It depends. For some items, like backpacks, a lot of women find gender-designed packs to be superior to the unisex models. Both of my Gregory packs are designed for women, and I love the way they wear on me.

Some women-specific gear is designed for only one body type in mind, which can be limiting. As for boots, Kim Brown, a hiker from Seattle, didn't choose the women's pair. "I had tried on a pair of women-specific backpacking boots and found them to be too narrow," she said. "And there was only that one choice. So I wandered over to the men's department and from the cornucopia of brands I chose a pair of men's Scarpas that are perfect for me."

Don't limit yourself. Try it on, and if you like it, it fits and the price is right, then buy it.

I'm going to get my period on my trip. Got advice on disposal and hygiene? Are bears going to be attracted to me?

Let's start with the bears. On the same August night in 1967, two women were attacked and killed by grizzly bears in separate incidents within Glacier National Park. These incidents were followed by speculation that odors associated with menstruation made these women more prone to attack by the bears. In the mid-eighties, researchers analyzed the circumstances of hundreds of grizzly bear attacks on humans, in-

cluding the attacks on the two women in Glacier, and concluded that there was no evidence linking menstruation to any of the attacks. Studies have shown that menstrual odors are essentially ignored by black bears, and no instances of black bears attacking or being attracted to menstruating women have been documented in North America.

So while there's no evidence that grizzly and black bears are particularly attracted to menstrual odors, certain precautions can be taken to reduce your risks of attack. They're along the lines of leave no trace and good hygiene anyway.

Good hygiene doesn't need to be forfeited on a multi-day backpack. Carry individually packaged pre-moistened, unscented cleaning towelettes and use them when going to the bathroom, under your arms, even to clean your face and hands to feel fresh. Use Purell gel on your hands before eating to minimize your risk of ingesting bacteria that can make you sick.

If you're really concerned about bears, opt for internal tampons (with an applicator for hygiene purposes) instead of external pads. Use only unscented items, and leave cosmetics and deodorants at home.

Of course, everything gets packed out—don't bury tampons or pads, toilet paper, or used towelettes. Double-bag them in zip-loc baggies, and store them with your food and garbage, hung at least 10 feet above the ground and 4 feet from the tree trunk.

One more thought on women's hygiene. Women who are prone to urinary tract infections may be more likely to get one on the trail. Pack those anti-bacterial towelettes and wipe front to back when you go to the bathroom. You may even pack along a few doses of the antibiotic used to treat your infections.

If we missed your own burning question or you have some advice of your own to share, post a comment on the Signpost blog the first week of May at www.wta.org/blog. ♦

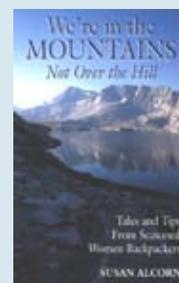
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Looking For More Advice and Inspiration?

We're In the Mountains, Not Over The Hill is Susan Alcorn's collection of stories and tips from scores of women backpackers. Profiles range from Isabella Bird (who hiked Colorado



125 years ago) to Irene Cline, the oldest woman to walk the Appalachian Trail. The book is packed everything from practical advice to the more spiritual side of things. (\$14.95, 2003, Shepard Canyon Books)