

# Pack a Backpack for Camping



## From Wired How-To Wiki

A well-packed sack will save your back.

*Photo by The Glasshalfull via [Flickr](#).*

It's happened to everyone before. You start out in the comfort of your living room, with a cavernous empty backpack and all your gear spread out before you.

Then, six miles out, you realize: Despite stuffing your pack to the brim, you've forgotten your rain shell and soaked your food in fuel. Here are a few tips to avoid mid-trip debacles and maximize the success of your adventure.

## Sleeping bag first

The first thing you pack should be the last thing you use. And unless you're rocking up El Cap or running the Appalachian Trail solo, that should be your sleeping bag. If you don't have a waterproof stuff sack, line yours with a heavy-duty garbage bag to keep your sleeping bag dry. If your pack doesn't have a sleeping bag-specific compartment, place it in the bottom of the bag.

## Distribute your supplies

**Tent:** Heaviest items go in the middle and closest to your back. For most people, that means that after your sleeping bag comes your tent and your cooking gear. Most tents made specifically for backpacking are small and light enough to fit in one side of your backpack. If you haven't shelled out for one yet, you should be able to keep the cloth components inside your bag and strap the poles on the outside. Keep in mind, however, that carrying vital equipment on the outside of your pack, such as tent poles, or inflatable insulating sleeping pads, may expose your equipment to severe wear and tear, and may even cause it to break, or fail when you need it most. For example, this approach is fine for a tame trip through a national park with forgiving terrain, but might be ill advised if you are on an off-trail solo-trek through the Kimberly region of Western Australia.

**Cooking Gear:** If you're planning on hot meals along the side of the trail, your portable burner is up next. Many outdoor companies also manufacture portable stoves and dishes that fit inside one another for compact storage, but if you don't have a matching set, you can also store all of your cooking gear inside your biggest pot. Just make sure that your fuel canister is sealed tightly and stored underneath your food. Leaking white gas is not an uncommon occurrence, and nothing cuts a trip shorter than discovering that your cheese and pitas have become firestarters.

**Food:** Separate your travel food—trail mix, string cheese, sandwiches -- and put them in a separate and more easily accessible part of your backpack, usually the detachable fanny pack or outside pockets. The rest of your food goes into a storage bag above your camping gear.

**Dry Clothes:** Even if you don't intend to change your clothes, bring an extra set - especially socks! It can vastly improve your comfort levels in the event of a minor incident like falling into a creek, can keep you

alive after a more serious one like falling into a partially frozen creek in the winter. Also (here is where the socks come in) it can be the difference between hiking back at the end of your trip and being carried back early when the blisters on your feet break and start to fester. Dry clothes can also be rolled up and used to fill empty pockets in your pack, so the packing space used can be minimal.

**Bear canisters are storage:** If you're going through bear country, use your bear canister as a storage compartment in your bag. Nothing is more irritating or frightening than discovering, at the end of the night, that your half-dozen granola bars just won't fit in the canister. A word to the wise: Don't store those extra bars in your sleeping bag.

**Water for cooking food:** Dried food is good if you're near water, and canned is good if you're not. Couscous, freeze-dried vegetables and rice are all popular options. Plan ahead when it comes to finding water. If you're in a place where fresh water is hard to find, learn the techniques for acquiring it in your chosen environment. Be realistic about it too. Successful desert travel often calls for caching of water beforehand. If that's not an option and water isn't available, go somewhere else. You're not going to be able to carry enough water for more than a day or two at a time.

### **Keep survival gear on your person**

In some cases, this might mean in a separate fanny pack. At the very least, keep a granola bar, knife, and a packet of waterproof matches in your pocket. Even the best Boy Scout can get lost on a scouting mission to find a good campsite, and an extra sandwich goes a long way to keeping you comfortable. Keep odds and ends, like bug repellent, sunscreen and a light shell, in the top compartment of your bag or in your fanny pack. Little items have a way of settling at the bottom of your pack just when you need them the most.

### **Balance it out**

Fill in the loose spaces in your pack with your extra clothes to prevent items from rattling around. For longer trips, you do not want not vacuum seal your clothing to save space because when you finally do need them they have become an unmanageable volume of clothing that you had "compacted" when you started. There is no real way to get it back compacted like it was when you started. There is an alternative to this if you do want to seal your clothes in water proof bags. There are bags designed for this that will let the air out and let them conform very well to the inside your pack and thus making every thing in your pack nice and snug.

Once your bag is full, hoist your pack and test it. Is one side heavier than the other? An unbalanced pack can affect your stride and cause all sorts of back and shoulder pain.

Depending on who you go camping with, you may get used to packing different things -- most people share a tent, as well as other group gear like cooking equipment, trowel, water treatment, med kit, and any kind of rock or alpine gear you might be packing. Food, however, should be equitably distributed based on factors like body weight, strength, and expected consumption. Your average person will eat around two pounds of food every day ([www.dailytipper.com](http://www.dailytipper.com)), making food the single heaviest "item" you're likely to pack. If someone eats more than average, plan for that and have them carry a bit more of the weight as they're likely to be heavier and therefore more up to carrying a bigger load.

With a little practice, your lumbering load will quickly become streamlined and sleek, making the Appalachian Trail a much more manageable proposition.