

How to Pack a Backpack

A correctly organized backpack will make your hike even more comfortable.

Regardless of how in shape you might be, incorrectly packing a backpack can quickly lead to overexertion on even the simplest of hikes. Here are a few tips to make your backpack as comfortable as possible. Keep in mind, however, this is a general guideline. You may have to tweak these tips a little bit depending on what gear you decide to bring on a hike.

- **Find the right backpack.** First things first, be sure that your backpack fits you well and also will be adequate for your hike. If you are going on a simple day hike, you don't need a humongous expedition pack. Likewise, daypacks are generally too small for multi-day use.
- **Sleeping bag at the bottom.** Even though most hikers will build upon these general rules to create their unique packing system, almost everyone agrees that your sleeping bag belongs at the bottom of the pack. On an external frame pack, this means it is lashed to the frame below the pack itself.
- **Back breakers.** Heavier items should be kept close to your back and higher up in your pack to help you maintain a center of gravity. This setup keeps you from breaking your back with heavy loads that pull your pack backwards or side to side. Avoid skewing the weight distribution to one side. Even complex suspension systems on internal frame packs can't compensate for a dramatic difference in weight from one side to another.
- **Plan for easy access.** Put essential items like a map, first-aid kit, flashlight, and trail snacks on outside pouches or in upper compartments for easy access during breaks. Many packs have holsters or mesh side-pockets for your water bottles. Other items like spare clothing or a groundcloth that you know you won't use until you get to a campsite should be deeper in your pack.
- **Don't waste space!** Cram your cooking pots with food or your stove so they don't get separated. If you put extra clothing in a resealable plastic bag to keep it dry, squeeze the air out of the bag before completely zipping it up.
- **Prevent food and gear spoilage.** Fuel for your stove should be nowhere near your food or your tent. Double check the cap to ensure it is screwed on tightly. Leaky fuel can spoil your food and ruin the waterproof layers of your tent or raingear.



- **Waterproof your pack.** A good pack cover will not just keep the contents of your pack dry but will also keep the pack itself dry. Water is heavy, so a dry pack is nice on many levels. Still, it's a good idea to put your clothing and any electronics in resealable plastic bags to ensure it all stays dry. Alternatively, you could line the inside of your backpack with a plastic trash bag. A stuff sack with a down sleeping bag should be lined with a plastic bag, especially if it is on the outside of a pack. Down sleeping bags must be completely dry to be effective.
- **If you use an external frame pack,** you may have to lash several items to the outside of the pack. Tie each item down as tightly as possible so that it doesn't sway as you walk. The extra movement on the pack will make you work harder to keep your balance on the trail. Overall, try to minimize the number of items you keep on the outside of your pack.
- **Wear your pack correctly.** When putting on your pack, loosen all the straps. First tighten the hip belt (which should be *on* your hips, not above them), and then the shoulder straps and then the load lifters (near your shoulders). Finally adjust the load stabilizer straps on the hip belt (at the back of the belt). Your sternum strap should not be tight but simply help keep the shoulder straps in position – you want to be able to breathe freely.

This list is just a general guide to help you find out what works best for you. With practice and experience you'll find a packing method that best suits the equipment that you prefer to take with you on your hikes.

