

Backcountry Safety Tips: Travel In Primitive/Wilderness Areas



Stanislaus National Forest

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Backcountry is beautiful but primitive and you will be on your own. Before going in, check with the local Ranger District for the latest weather conditions and possible hazards such as swollen creeks or unstable snow accumulation. Sierra weather can change rapidly and that poses a danger to backcountry visitors. Take adequate protective clothing before venturing into the backcountry. Be on your guard!

Drinking Water

An intestinal disorder called GIARDIASIS (gee-ar-dye-a-sis) is a disease that may be contracted from drinking untreated “natural” water. Such water may be clear, cold and free running, may look, smell and taste good but it may be dangerous despite the safe appearance. Giardiasis is caused by a microscopic organism—*Giardia lamblia*. The cystic form of giardia may be found in mountain streams and lakes. With proper diagnosis, the disease is curable with medication prescribed by a physician.

Although giardiasis can be incapacitating, it is not usually life threatening. Symptoms usually include diarrhea, increased gas, loss of appetite, abdominal cramps and bloating. These discomforts may first appear a few days to a few weeks after ingestion of giardia and may last up to six weeks.

Most people are unaware that they have been infected because they often return home before the onset of symptoms. Although other diseases can have similar symptoms, if you have ingested untreated water you should suspect giardiasis and inform your doctor.

Treating the Water

The surest treatment to destroy giardia and other organisms is to boil water for at least one minute. At higher altitudes, water boils at a lower temperature. Maintain the boil for 3 to 5 minutes.



A 0.5 micron filter can remove most harmful bacteria and protozoa—including giardia. Chemical disinfectants such as iodine or chlorine (tablets or drops) are not reliable in killing giardia—although these products work well against most waterborne bacteria and viruses that cause disease. If chemical disinfection method is used, iodine is more effective than chlorine. If possible, filter the water first and then allow the iodine to work for at least an hour before drinking the liquid. For short trips, take a supply of water from home or other domestic source.

Sanitation

Giardiasis and other diseases can be readily transmitted between humans and animals. Human or animal feces can contain the organism. Good sanitation practices should be followed to prevent spreading disease through food handling. Waste should be buried 8” deep and at least 100’ away from any natural waters.

Hypothermia

Caused by a rapid loss of body heat, hypothermia is the most dangerous of backcountry hazards. It can even strike on a balmy day under conditions you would least expect. Often, victims don’t recognize the symptoms because of comparatively “mild” conditions. The victim may have to rely on fellow travelers to notice the symptoms and act quickly to ensure recovery.



Drastic lowering of the inner body temperature causes rapid, progressive mental and physical collapse. Symptoms include bouts of shivering, vague or slurred speech, memory lapse, fumbling hands, lurching walk, drowsiness or exhaustion and apparent lack of concern about physical discomfort.

Get the victim out of the wind and wet. Restore body temperature. Skin-to-skin contact is quickest. Place the victim in a dry sleeping bag. Have one or two heat donors then surround the victim inside the sleeping bag. If the victim is conscious, give warm drink (not coffee or other stimulant). When victim is stable, carry the person out in windproof and waterproof covering. These steps are critical!

Altitude Sickness

Altitude sickness may occur if you overexert at high elevations where oxygen supply is reduced. Victims should stop and rest, breathe deeply and move slowly to lower elevations.

Hyperventilation

Hyperventilation is caused by breathing too rapidly, causing a decrease of carbon dioxide levels in the blood which in turn results in lightheadedness and a cold feeling. Calm the victim and have the person relax and breathe into a glove, a bag or a hat until normal breathing is restored.

Exhaustion

Exhaustion occurs because the person may be pushing too hard and is embarrassed to ask the party to slow the pace down. Good principles of backcountry travel include: 1) take it slow, 2) rest often, and 3) drink and snack frequently to restore body energy.

Emergencies

If you're lost—take it easy, keep calm, admit to yourself that you're lost and don't panic. Sit down and try to figure out where you are. Use your head—not your legs. Three repeats of anything (shouts, whistles, etc.) is considered a sign of distress. Carry a police whistle for emergency use. Normally minor illnesses can become major concerns at high elevations. If you start to get sick, try to get out of the mountains (or at least to a lower elevation) while you can still travel.

Poison Oak and Snakebite

Be alert. Poison oak grows up to about 5,000' elevation. Rattlesnakes have been found at 9,000' elevation and higher. Examine densely vegetated areas for poison oak. Be careful crossing rocky areas or stepping over downed trees. A rattlesnake may be on the other side.

People and Horses

If you encounter travelers who have horses or pack stock, move off the trail on the downhill side and let them pass. Allow horses plenty of room on trails. The stock are easily frightened by backpacking equipment.

Campfire Safety

The greatest wildland hazard is fire. If the area you visit permits wood campfires, keep these guidelines in mind:

1. Use a portable stove for cooking.
2. Build a small fire for relaxing.
3. Use only dead and downed wood. Never break branches from standing trees, even if they look dead. The tree may be alive and breaking branches can further injure it.

Remember—if you use only a small amount of available wood, campers who come after you will be able to enjoy a campfire as well.



Rodent Burrows

Avoid setting up camp in an obvious rodent community. In some cases, their fleas carry sickness and the infestation is more active in the burrows.

Camp Cleanliness

Keeping your camp clean and free of trash makes it a more pleasant experience for you and your group. It also reduces the chances that you'll be visited by bears or other unwanted animal neighbors. Keep food and garbage tightly sealed in plastic bags and out of reach.

Don't keep your food stores in your camp—stash the edibles at least 40' from your campsite (in case the animals do get a whiff of what you brought along). You can tie your food in a backpack and "counter-balance" it suspended from a tree branch. The easiest method of guarding your food is to rent or purchase bear canisters—specially designed containers that bears (or cubs) can't open and get to your food. They are available at many sporting goods or outdoor/outfitter retail outlets.

If you have questions regarding this or any information about the Forest, please contact:

Stanislaus National Forest

Supervisor's Office
19777 Greenley Road
Sonora, CA 95370
(209) 532-3671
TDD: (209) 533-0765