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Self-Help Advice

# Prepared for the Woods



Canada

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- Scouts Canada**
- St. John Ambulance**
- National Search and Rescue Secretariat**
- The Canadian Automobile Association**
- Parks Canada**

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# Prepared for the woods



EVERY YEAR THE NEWS CARRIES STORIES ABOUT ADULTS AND CHILDREN BEING LOST IN THE WOODS. ALL TOO OFTEN THE STORIES CONTAIN LINES SUCH AS, "... CLAD ONLY IN A SWEATER, SHORTS AND RUNNING SHOES," OR "WANDERED INTO THE BUSH ... WHILE PICKING BLUEBERRIES." NOBODY EXPECTS TO GET LOST AND YET IT HAPPENS FREQUENTLY.

This booklet lists basic precautions that can help protect you on trips into the wilderness. For more detailed information, check with your local library for books on wilderness survival and safety. Other good sources of information, especially on local conditions, are national/provincial parks, recreational organizations, the RCMP, local police and volunteer search-and-rescue groups.

## PREPARATION AND PLANNING

Common sense and preparation are keys to enjoyable outdoor activities such as camping, hunting, fishing, cross-country skiing, snowshoeing, hiking, and berry or mushroom picking. Know your limitations and those of your group. Be certain to know how to use a compass.



### *Travel plans*

Purchase a good map of your destination area. Always tell someone where you are going. If there is no one around, leave a note in your home, trailer, tent or car. Make sure your note includes date, time of departure, number of people in your party, direction of travel and estimated time of return.

### **Equipment**

Make sure all your equipment is in good working order and that you know how to use it. If in doubt about what you need, consult a local outfitter or recreational organization. It pays to invest in good equipment.

### **Clothing**



Wear clothes and footwear appropriate for the terrain and weather conditions you expect to encounter. Always wear or carry headgear (a neckerchief can serve as both a hat and as a sling or a bandage). If you run into bad weather, you will need to conserve body heat; more heat is lost through your head than any other part of your body. Remember: weather and temperature can change with frightening speed.

### **Footprinting**

'Footprint' members of your group before they set out on a wilderness trip. Place a sheet of tinfoil on a piece of soft material such as a towel. Have everyone put on their shoes and step on the tinfoil and then mark each set of footprints with the individual's name. Make sure you repeat the procedure for each change of footwear. This way, if someone becomes lost, searchers will be able to distinguish his or her tracks from others in the search area. This will give searchers a clue to the person's direction of travel.



### **Garbage bags**

Garbage bags are compact, easily carried and can protect both adults and children from hypothermia. Cut a hole for the face in the bottom of the bag. The bag will help you to conserve body heat and

stay dry in cool or wet weather. Orange or yellow bags are usually best. They can help searchers see you better if you are lost in dense bush. Make sure everyone knows how to wear the bag.



### ***Buddy system***

If possible, never go camping, hiking, hunting, fishing, cross-country skiing, snowshoeing, or berry picking alone. Adults and children are far safer when they have a partner.

## **SAFETY TIPS**

### ***Wool vs. cotton***

Cotton clothing is fine for hot, dry weather. Wool clothing is best in wet or cool weather, as it retains warmth, even when wet. Clothes made of cotton, such as blue jeans, are useless when soaked and speed up loss of body heat (up to 200 times as fast as dry clothes).

### ***Fires***

Build fires on sand, earth or gravel. Never leave a fire unattended and always make sure it is out when you are finished.

### ***Poisonous plants***

Learn to recognize poisonous plants such as poison ivy, poison oak or sumac. Use strong soap and water, then rubbing alcohol if exposed to any poisonous plant. Commercial lotions are also available.

### ***Set boundaries***

Make sure children are familiar with the camping area. Show them where and how far they can go. Do the same for swimming areas.

### ***Whistle***

Everyone in your group should carry a whistle. Pin a whistle to a child's shirt or hang it around his or her neck. Make sure everyone knows that three blasts on a whistle or three shouts are recognized as a distress call.



## Swimming

Make sure you or the children in your care check for hidden obstacles under the surface of the water (e.g., rocks and logs). Avoid water with fast currents. Never swim alone.



## Wildlife

Avoid wild animals that come too near or seem too friendly.

## Bears

The best way to avoid a confrontation is by taking these basic precautions:

- Never store food in your tent (some parks have bear-resistant food storage facilities).
- Do not cook or eat in or near your tent.
- Do not sleep in clothes worn while cooking, as clothing absorbs food odours.
- Store and carry food (and garbage) in airtight containers.
- Do not bury garbage, as bears (and other animals) can easily dig it up. The bear may then become a danger to the next group of hikers.
- Hang food packs (and your toothpaste) from a tree out of reach of bears (and other animals) and away from your immediate camping area.
- Never feed a bear.
- Stay away from a mother and her cubs.
- Make noise when you walk in the bush to advertise your presence.
- Avoid scented cosmetics – bears may be attracted to perfumes, hair sprays and soaps.
- Women should be extra careful during menstruation to take steps to eliminate odours, particularly from used materials, by storing them in an airtight container.

Bears are very intelligent and complex animals. Each bear and each encounter is unique; there is no single strategy that will work in all situations. Some guidelines:

- Stay calm. Most bears don't want to attack you; they usually want to avoid you and ensure you're not a threat. Bears may bluff their way out of an encounter by charging and then turning away at the last second. Bears may also react defensively by woofing, growling, snapping their jaws, and laying their ears back.
- Immediately pick up small children and stay in a group.
- Don't drop your pack. It can provide protection.
- Back away slowly, never run! Bears can run as fast as a racehorse, both uphill and downhill.
- Talk calmly and firmly. If a bear rears on its hind legs and waves its nose about, it is trying to identify you. Remain still and talk calmly, so it knows you are not a prey animal. A scream or sudden movement may trigger an attack.
- Leave the area or take a detour. If this is impossible, wait until the bear moves away. Always leave the bear an escape route.

Bears do not like surprises. Try to avoid such encounters by being alert and making noise.



If you surprise a bear and it defends itself, use bear spray if you have it. If contact has occurred or is imminent, **PLAY DEAD!** Lie on your stomach with legs apart. Protect your face, the back of your head and neck with your arms. Remain still until the bear leaves the area. These attacks seldom last more than a few minutes.

While fighting back usually increases the intensity of such an attack, in some cases it has caused the bear to leave. If the attack continues for more than several minutes, consider fighting back.

If a bear stalks you and then attacks, or attacks at night, DON'T PLAY DEAD – FIGHT BACK! First, try to escape, preferably to a building, car or up a tree. If you can't escape, or if the bear follows, use bear spray or shout and try to intimidate the bear with a branch or rock. Do whatever it takes to let the bear know you are not easy prey. This kind of attack is very rare but can be very serious because it often means the bear is looking for food and preying on you.

For more information on bears, consult your local library, park authorities and recreational organizations.

## **SURVIVAL TIPS**

No one plans on being lost but if it does happen you will need to know basic survival rules.



### ***Hypothermia***

Hypothermia occurs when the body loses heat faster than it can produce it. This happens when a person is exposed to rain, wind and cold without adequate clothing and shelter. Your most important task, if you are lost, is to guard yourself against hypothermia.

### ***Don't panic***

Fear is your worst enemy. It is impossible to think logically if you panic. Fear is a natural reaction but you must control it. Accept the reality of your situation and then concentrate on how to better your position. Doing something positive will help increase your confidence, and confidence is important for survival.

### ***Avoid fatigue***

Slow down. Exertion uses up calories and creates perspiration which wastes body fluids. Both increase your susceptibility to hypothermia.

### ***Stay where you are***

Unless you can meet all the following conditions, don't try to walk to safety:

- You know approximately where you are and where you want to go.
- You have a means of setting direction and maintaining it.
- You have clothing that will stand up to any type of weather conditions you may run into.
- You carry sufficient food, fuel and shelter with you.

### ***Fire***

Fire is one of the best survival tools.

With fire, you can keep warm, dry your clothes and signal for help. Always carry matches in a waterproof container

with you when camping, hunting, fishing, hiking, cross-country skiing, snowshoeing, or berry picking. Fires can also be started using a camera lens, bottle bottom or non-plastic eyeglasses. For more information, check your local library for books on wilderness survival.



### ***Shelter***

A variety of shelters can be fashioned using materials found in the woods and natural formations such as caves or fallen trees. Learn how to use tree branches to provide shelter and warmth. Wilderness survival books will give more information on emergency shelters. Remember to conserve your energy and don't exhaust yourself by building an elaborate shelter.



### **Water**

Water is more important to your survival than food. You can survive for several weeks without food but only a matter of days without water.

Dehydration will increase your susceptibility to fatigue and hypothermia. Your most reliable sources of water are lakes and streams. Most plants also contain drinkable water. In winter, snow and ice can be melted for drinking water, but don't melt them in your mouth as they will lower your body temperature and contribute to hypothermia.

### **Survival/first aid kits**

Kits can be pocket-size or larger, depending on the needs of each individual or situation. St. John Ambulance has designed a convenient belt-type first aid kit for the individual hiker, hunter, and camper. Below is a list of suggested items that could be included in a basic survival/first aid kit.

- matches in a waterproof container
- plastic food bags
- orange or yellow plastic garbage bag
- high-energy snack
- whistle (pea-less whistles are best)
- pocket knife
- compass (make sure you know how to use it)
- lightweight space blanket
- reflector or hand mirror (for signalling)
- insect repellent
- tube of antibiotic ointment
- plastic bandage strips



Anyone considering a wilderness trip should have a more comprehensive kit. For suggestions on what to include, check books on wilderness survival.

## **SURVIVAL TIPS FOR CHILDREN**

### ***Stay in one place***

Teach children that a tree can be a friend. Tell them if they ever get lost to select a tree (or some other object) near a clearing and stay there. If they are frightened, they can hug and talk to the tree. This will help prevent panic and keep the child in one place, increasing chances of discovery.

### ***Noises***

Tell children to yell at noises that scare them. If it is an animal, they will frighten it away. This will also help searchers find them.

### ***Look big***

A child can attract the attention of a search plane passing overhead by lying down in a clearing, wearing a brightly coloured garbage bag or jacket.



### ***No punishment***

Reassure children that no one will be angry with them if they get lost. There have been cases where children have hidden from searchers because they were afraid of being punished.

# Additional information

For general information or to order our self-help brochures, please contact:

## **Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness Canada**

Communications Division  
340 Laurier Ave. West, Ottawa, Canada K1A 0P8  
Telephone: (613) 991-2800  
Toll-free: 1-800-830-3118  
Fax: (613) 998-9589  
E-mail: [communications@psepc.gc.ca](mailto:communications@psepc.gc.ca)  
Internet: [www.psepc.gc.ca](http://www.psepc.gc.ca)

Please contact your provincial/territorial emergency management organization (EMO) for regional or local information on emergency preparedness.

### *Newfoundland and Labrador*

Emergency Measures Organization  
Telephone: (709) 729-3703  
Fax: (709) 729-3857

### *Prince Edward Island*

Emergency Measures Organization  
Telephone: (902) 888-8050  
Fax: (902) 888-8054

### ***Nova Scotia***

Emergency Measures Organization

Telephone: (902) 424-5620

Fax: (902) 424-5376

### ***New Brunswick***

Emergency Measures Organization

Telephone: (506) 453-2133

Toll-free: (800) 561-4034

Fax: (506) 453-5513

### ***Québec***

Direction générale de la sécurité civile et  
de la sécurité incendie

Telephone: (418) 646-7950

Fax: (418) 646-5427

Toll-free Emergency Number: 1-866-776-8345

Emergency Number: (418) 643-3256

Or one of these regional offices:

- Bas-Saint-Laurent – Gaspésie –  
Îles-de-la-Madeleine: (418) 727-3589
- Saguenay – Lac-St-Jean – Côte-Nord: (418) 695-7872
- Capitale Nationale – Chaudière –  
Appalaches – Nunavik: (418) 643-3244
- Mauricie – Centre-du-Québec: (819) 371-6703
- Montréal – Laval – Laurentides –  
Lanaudière: (514) 873-1300
- Montérégie – Estrie: (514) 873-1324
- Outaouais – Abitibi – Témiscamingue –  
Nord-du-Québec: (819) 772-3737

### ***Ontario***

Emergency Management Ontario

Telephone: (416) 212-3468

Fax: (416) 212-3498

### ***Manitoba***

Emergency Measures Organization

Telephone: (204) 945-4772

Toll-free: 1-888-826-8298

Fax: (204) 945-4620

### ***Saskatchewan***

Saskatchewan Emergency Planning

Telephone: (306) 787-9563

Fax: (306) 787-1694

### ***Alberta***

Emergency Management Alberta

Telephone: (780) 422-9000

Toll-free in Alberta, dial 310-0000-780-422-9000

Fax: (780) 422-1549

### ***British Columbia***

Provincial Emergency Program (PEP)

Telephone: (250) 952-4913

Fax: (250) 952-4888

### ***Northwest Territories***

Emergency Measures Organization

Telephone: (867) 873-7785

Fax: (867) 873-8193

### ***Yukon***

Emergency Measures Organization

Telephone: (867) 667-5220

Fax: (867) 393-6266

### ***Nunavut***

Nunavut Emergency Management

Telephone: (867) 975-5300

Fax: (867) 979-4221

## **Towards a safer, more secure Canada**

Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness Canada (PSEPC) leads the Government of Canada's emergency and business continuity planning.

Through its programs and information products, PSEPC enhances the capacity of individuals, communities, businesses and governments to manage risks to their physical and cyber environments.

[www.safeguard.ca](http://www.safeguard.ca)

## **SAFE GUARD**

Safeguard is a national partnership that helps increase the public awareness of emergency preparedness in Canada.

Other titles in this self-help series include:

- Be Prepared, Not Scared
- Floods – What to do before and after
- Prepare to Survive a Major Earthquake
- Preparing for the Unexpected
- Severe Storms
- Storm Surges
- Winter Power Failures
- Winter Driving –  
You, your car and winter storms