

How to Pack and Hoist a Backpack



Packed efficiently, a backpack can swallow an amazing array of gear. But what goes where? There's no one right way to pack. Lay out all your gear at home and try out different loading routines until you've found what works best for you. Use a [backpacking checklist](#) to ensure you have everything and make notes on your list about what worked well (or poorly) after each trip.

A well-loaded pack will feel balanced when resting on your hips and won't shift or sway as you hike with it.

Packing can be broken down into three zones, plus peripheral storage:

- Bottom zone: Good for bulky gear and items not needed until camp.
- Core zone: Good for your denser, heavier items.
- Top zone: Good for bulkier essentials you might need on the trail.
- Accessory pockets: Good for essentials you'll need urgently or often.
- Tool loops and lash-on points: Good for oversized or overly long items.

Visualize stacking cordwood. You're laying down rows, not building columns: Fill nooks and crannies until you have a solid, stable load—and be sure weight is equally balanced on each side. Tighten compression straps to streamline your load and prevent it from shifting as you hike.

Bottom-of-Pack Items



Bulky items you won't need before making camp include:

- Sleeping bag (many packs have a bottom compartment sized for one)
- Sleeping pad (especially if it rolls into a tiny shape)
- Any layers, like long underwear, that you plan to sleep in
- Camp shoes or down booties

Packing this kind of soft, squishy gear at the bottom also creates a kind of internal shock-absorption system for your back and your pack.

Core-of-Pack Items



Heavy, dense gear you won't need to access during your hike includes:

- Food stash (entrees, not snacks)
- Cook kit
- Stove
- Water reservoir (unless you prefer bottles for hydration)
- Bear canister (containing food and all other scented items, plus whatever bulky items help fill it to the brim)

Packing heavy items here helps create a stable center of gravity and directs the load downward rather than backward. Placed too low, heavy gear causes a pack to sag; placed too high, it makes a pack feel tippy.

Carrying liquid fuel? Make sure your fuel-bottle cap is tight. Pack the bottle upright and place it below (separated from) your food in case of a spill.

Consider wrapping soft items around bulky gear to prevent shifting. Use these soft items to fill in gaps and create a buffer between bulky items and a water reservoir:

- Tent body
- Tent footprint
- Rainfly
- Extra clothing

Tip: Trying to slip a full reservoir into a full pack won't be easy. Even if it has a separate compartment, it's best to fill the reservoir and put it in your pack first.

Top-of-Pack Items



Bulky trail essentials work well here:

- Insulated jacket
- Fleece jacket and pants
- Rain jacket
- First-aid kit
- Water filter or purifier
- Toilet supplies (trowel, TP, used TP bag)

Some people also like to stash their tent at the top of the pack for fast access if stormy weather moves in before they've set up camp.

Accessory Pockets



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- Map
- Compass
- GPS
- Sunglasses
- Sunscreen
- Lip balm
- Headlamp
- Bug spray
- Snacks
- Water bottles
- Raincover
- Car keys (look for a clip inside one of the pockets)
- ID and cash stash

Tool Loops and Lash-On Points



Some of the most common gear to strap on the outside of your pack includes:

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- Trekking poles
- Tent poles
- Large sleeping pad
- Camp stool or chair
- Ice axe
- Crampons
- Climbing rope

Many packs have special tool loops, fasteners or other storage solutions for some of this gear. Daisy chains, lash patches and compression straps can also be used to wrangle gear that simply can't be carried in any other place.

However, because this gear can snag on branches or scrape against rocks, you should minimize how many items you carry on the outside of your pack.

How to Hoist Your Loaded Pack



A common mistake made by beginners is to lift a pack by a shoulder strap. Not only can this damage and prematurely wear out your shoulder harness, it also makes it difficult to control your pack as you try to wrestle it onto your back.

Instead, follow these steps and you'll be able to smoothly hoist even a heavily loaded pack from the ground to your back:

- Loosen all of your straps slightly to make the pack easier to slip on.
- Tilt your pack to an upright position on the ground.
- Stand next to the back panel; have your legs well apart and knees bent.
- Grab the haul loop (the webbing loop at the top of the back panel on your pack).
- Lift and slide the pack up to your thigh and let it rest; keep your hand on the haul loop for control.
- Slip your other arm and shoulder through one shoulder strap until your shoulder is cradled by the padding.
- Lean forward and swing the pack onto your back. Now slip the hand that was holding the haul loop through the other shoulder strap.
- Buckle up and make your usual fit adjustments.

The Ten Essentials

The must-haves for safety, survival, and basic comfort:

1. Navigation

- [Map](#) (with protective case)
- [Compass](#)
- [GPS](#) (optional)
- [Altimeter](#) (optional)

2. Sun protection

- [Sunscreen](#)
- [Lip balm](#)
- [Sunglasses](#)

3. Insulation

- [Jacket, vest, pants, gloves, hat](#) (see [Clothing](#), below)

4. Illumination

- [Headlamp](#) or [flashlight](#)
- [Extra batteries](#)

5. First-aid supplies

- [First-aid kit](#) (see our [First-Aid Checklist](#))

6. Fire

- Matches or lighter
- Waterproof container
- Fire starter (for emergency survival fire)

7. Repair kit and tools

- Knife or multi-tool
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Repair kits for stove, mattress; duct tape strips

8. Nutrition

- Extra day's supply of food

9. Hydration

- Water bottles or hydration reservoirs
- Water filter or other treatment system

10. Emergency shelter

- Tent, tarp, bivy or reflective blanket

Beyond the Ten Essentials

- Backpack
- Daypack or summit pack
- Pack cover
- Tent, tarp or bivy sack (with stakes, guylines)
- Tent-pole repair sleeve
- Footprint (if desired for tent)
- Sleeping bag
- Stuff sack or compression sack
- Sleeping pad
- Pillow or stuffable pillow case
- Whistle (plus signaling mirror)
- Multifunction watch with altimeter
- Trekking poles
- Ice axe
- Meals
- Energy food (bars, gels, chews, trail mix)
- Energy beverages or drink mixes
- Stove
- Fuel
- Cookset (with pot grabber)
- Dishes or bowls
- Utensils
- Cups (measuring cups)
- Bear canister (or hang bags for food)
- Nylon cord (50' for hanging food)
- Backup water treatment
- Collapsible sink or container
- Packable lantern

Warm or Cold

Clothing: Warm Weather

- Wicking T-shirt (synthetic or wool)
- Wicking underwear
- Quick-drying pants or shorts
- Long-sleeve shirt (for sun, bugs)
- Sun-shielding hat
- Bandana or Buff

Clothing: Cool Weather

- Wicking long-sleeve T-shirt
- Wicking long underwear (good sleepwear)
- Hat, cap, skullcap, balaclava or headband
- Gloves or mittens
- Rainwear (jacket, pants)
- Fleece jacket or vest, and pants

Footwear; Assorted Personal Items

- Hiking Boots or hiking shoes suited to terrain
- Socks (synthetic or wool) plus spares
- Gaiters
- Sandals (for fording, in camp) • Camera or helmet cam
- Extra memory cards
- Binoculars
- Permits
- Route description or guidebook
- Field guide(s); star identifier
- Outdoor journal and pen or pencil
- Credit card; small amount of cash
- Earplugs and eye shade
- Toilet paper
- Sanitation trowel
- Hand sanitizer
- Insect repellent
- Bear spray
- Toothbrush and/or toiletry kit
- Biodegradable soap (and shower bag)
- Quick-dry towel
- Cell phone / satellite communicator / 2-way radios
- Personal locator beacon
- Post-hike snacks, water, towel, clothing change
- Trip itinerary left with friend and under car seat

Backpack Breakfasts

Breakfast Scramble

1 3/4 cup instant mashed potatoes
1/2 cup freeze-dried eggs with bacon
1 1/2 cup water
1 Tbsp dry milk
Cheddar cheese (optional)

At home: Combine all dry ingredients in a zip lock freezer bag.

On the trail: Heat water in pot (the hotter the better). Add to freezer bag and stir. Let sit for 5 minutes.
Makes 1 serving



Strawberry Sensation

1 cup Strawberry Frosted Mini-Wheats
1/2 cup dried strawberries
1/4 cup yogurt covered raisins
1/4 cup chocolate chips, milk or dark

At home: Combine all ingredients into zip lock bag.

On the trail: Eat as breakfast or a snack.

Makes 1 serving

Trail Pancakes

1 cup Biscuit mix
1 Tbsp dry milk
1 Tbsp sugar
2/3 cup water
1 Tbsp squeeze margarine

Note: Instead of squeeze margarine, you may substitute vegetable oil. If you do, keep 1 Tbsp of oil in a separate container and pour onto pan before cooking pancakes.

At home: Add mix, milk and sugar into a quart size zip lock bag. Seal and shake well.

On the trail: Add water and margarine to bag, seal and squish bag with hands to mix and remove air and lumps. Cut hole in the corner of the bag and squeeze onto a hot pan. Cook until bubbles form, flip, and cook till they are golden brown!

Makes approx. 6 pancakes



Spam and Eggs

- 1 single serving packet Spam (3 oz)
- 1 sun dried tomato, cut up
- 2 fresh eggs
- 1-2 Tbsp Parmesan or Romano cheese
- 1-2 Tbsp vegetable oil

Note: Eggs can go bad quickly, so only use eggs on the beginning of your trip.

At home: Put the eggs in a hiking egg carrier. Put the sun dried tomato and cheese into a zip lock bag. Carry the oil in a spill-proof container.

On the trail: Add oil to a pan. Dice the Spam into 1/4 inch chunks. Fry for a couple of minutes, until the spam begins to brown, then add the eggs and sun dried tomatoes. Scramble and cook until eggs are done. Serve topped with Parmesan cheese.

Makes 1 serving

Chocolate Banana Oatmeal

- 1/3 cup instant oatmeal
- 1 tsp unsweetened cocoa powder
- 2 Tbsp powdered milk
- 2 tsp brown sugar
- 1/4 cup freeze-dried bananas
- Chocolate cookies, crumbled (optional)

At home: Combine everything except the cookies into a zip lock bag. If you are bringing the cookies, package them separately.

On the trail: Bring 1 cup of water to a boil, add the oatmeal mix and stir. Simmer until the oatmeal is cooked through. Serve topped with the cookies.

Makes 1 serving

Lunch & Snack Recipes

Power through the day with an energy-packed lunch

Hummus

2 12-ounce cans of chickpeas
2 Tbsp olive oil
6 Tbsp sesame tahini
4 garlic cloves, minced
Juice of three lemons

At home: Mash the chickpeas with fork. Add the olive oil, tahini and lemon juice. If the mix is too thick, add two tablespoons of water. Add the garlic. Mix until smooth. Store it in a zip lock bag.

On the trail: Serve with slices of pita bread.

Makes 6 servings

Note: This is a great energy food as a snack or for lunch. It's full of protein and calories and can last more than a week. If you want to carry less weight, you can bring dry hummus, which can be mixed with water on the trail.



Ford Wraps

1 package smoked salmon (in sheets)
2 single serving packages cream cheese
2 large tortillas

At home: Carry the cream cheese and salmon separately.

On the trail: Spread 1 package of cream cheese on each of the tortillas. Put half of the salmon on each. Roll and eat.
Makes 1-2 serving

TIP: Keep tortillas from breaking inside your bag by placing them between two plastic plates then use the plates for dinner.

Backpacking Dinner Recipes



Ham and Pea Ramen

1-2 packages Ramen noodles
1/2 cup dried peas
Parmesan cheese
Ham
Red pepper flakes

At home: Repack Ramen noodles and dried peas into one zip lock bag, throwing away the flavor packs. In another zip lock bag combine cheese, ham, and pepper to taste.

On the trail: Add noodles and peas to a pot of boiling water. Once cooking, drain the water. Mix in cheese, ham, and red pepper.

Makes 1 serving

Cheesy Bacospuds

2 1/4 cup instant potatoes
1/2 cup instant dry milk
1 packet Butter Buds
1 1/2 Tbsp dried parsley flakes
1 1/2 Tbsp dried onions
Salt and pepper to taste
3/4 cup crumbled bacon
1 package powdered cheese spread

At home: Add all ingredients into quart size freezer zip lock bag.

On the trail: Bring 4 1/2 cups (less if using fresh cheese) to boil. Add water to bag, stir well. Let stand, and add more water if needed.

Makes 4 servings

Tuna Spaghetti

- 1 8-ounce package angel hair pasta
- 1 6-ounce can or packet of tuna in oil
- 8 dried tomatoes, sliced
- 1 tsp dried basil
- 1 tsp oregano
- 1/4 cup Parmesan cheese
- 1/2 tsp garlic powder

At home: Mix the basil, oregano, Parmesan cheese and garlic powder in a zip lock bag. Store other items separately.

On the trail: Soak tomatoes in 4 cups of water for 10 minutes or until rehydrated. Remove the tomatoes from water and bring to a boil. Break the angel hair pasta in half and add to the boiling water. Cook pasta until done, drain water. Leave noodles in the pot and add tuna, tomatoes, and contents of the cheese and spice bag. Stir well.

Makes 2 servings

Backpacking Biscuits

- 2 cups biscuit mix
- 1/4 cup powdered milk
- 1/2 tsp dried parsley
- 2 Tbsp freeze-dried corn
- 3 single serving Parmesan or Romano cheese packets

At home: Combine mix and milk into a quart size zip lock bag.

On the trail: Gently stir 1/2 cup water into bag. Make the dough into flat circles. Cook on pan, turning them when light brown.

Makes approx. 12 biscuits

Beefy Noodle Bowl

- 3 Tbsp beef jerky, shredded
- 1 3-ounce package Ramen noodles
- 1 1-ounce package instant onion soup
- 2 Tbsp mixed vegetables
- 1/4 tsp garlic powder
- 1/4 tsp ground ginger
- 1/2 tsp dried cilantro
- 1-2 packets soy sauce

At home: Discard the flavor packet from the noodles, and combine all of the dry ingredients in a quart size, freezer zip lock bag.

On the trail: Boil about 2 cups of water. Add water to zip lock bag, then stir well until noodles are soft and vegetables are rehydrated. Season with soy sauce to taste.

Makes 2 servings

Chicken Quinoa

- 1/2 cup quinoa
- 1 Tbsp dried chives
- 1 packet of [True Lemon](#)
- 1/4 tsp ground coriander
- 1/4 tsp ground cumin
- 1/4 tsp paprika
- 1 3-ounce foil packet of chicken

Note: You can also substitute 1 teaspoon of citrus juice or zest per packet.

At home: Combine everything, except chicken, in a quart size freezer zip lock bag. Carry the chicken separately.

On the trail: Bring 1 cup of water to boil. Add the quinoa and spices. Reduce heat and simmer for 10-15 minutes, or until quinoa is tender. Add the chicken, toss and serve.

Makes 1 serving

Dessert Recipes

Chocolate Orange Cheesecake

- 5 chocolate wafer cookies, crushed
- 2 packets [True Orange](#)
- 2 Tbsp mini chocolate chips
- 1 tsp sugar
- 1 2-ounce package shelf stable cream cheese

Note: True Orange is also available at www.truelemon.com or some grocery stores. You can also substitute 1 teaspoon citrus juice or zest per packet.

At home: Combine everything in a zip lock bag. Do not open the cream cheese.

On the trail: Add the cream cheese to the dry ingredients. Seal the bag and smooch until well combined. Serve.

Makes 1 serving

Chocolate Mangos

- 1 7-ounce package semisweet baking chocolate
- 10 pieces crystallized ginger
- 10 slices dried mango
- 2 Tbsp peanut oil

At home: Pour peanut oil into a small plastic bottle. Place mango and ginger in zip lock bag.

On the trail: Fill a pan 3/4 full of water. Place on stove over medium heat. Place chocolate in a metal cup or small pot in pan (this prevents chocolate from burning). Pour in peanut oil. Stir until chocolate melts. Dip mango and ginger slices into chocolate, eating as a fondue.

Makes 2 servings

Sources

- <https://www.rei.com/learn/expert-advice/loading-backpack.html>
- <http://www.wildbackpacker.com/>