

AMC Facts: Clothing, Gear and Weather in the Mountains

World-class Weather

Compared to the world's major mountain ranges, the mountains of the Appalachian region rank as fairly small peaks. New Hampshire's Mt. Washington, the tallest mountain in the northeastern United States, is just a bit less than one-quarter the height of Mt. Everest, the world's tallest mountain.

That lack of stature, however, provides no indication of the mountain's climate. In 1934, a world-record wind speed of 231 mph was recorded on Mt. Washington's summit. The temperature on the summit has never risen above 72 degrees Fahrenheit, and hurricane-force winds are common, making the conditions on top feel even colder. More than 129 people have died on Mt. Washington, one-third due to weather-related complications.

While Mt. Washington may be the most severe example, most mountain ranges are known for their unpredictable, and sometimes dangerous, weather. It is essential that you dress appropriately and keep an eye on the sky when hiking in the mountains.

Be respectful of the weather, and turn back if bad weather threatens.

Clothing

Even if it feels like summertime in the valleys, it can be winterlike on the high peaks. It's best to wear a synthetic layer closest to your skin to wick away moisture from perspiration. If you must hike in cotton T-shirts and shorts, carry other clothing to change into should the weather turn cold. Cotton soaks up sweat and doesn't dry readily, leaving its wearer wet and chilly when activity slows or when the wind picks up – as is often the case on a summit.

Synthetic materials, such as polypropylene and fleece, are more appropriate because they wick perspiration away from the body, leaving the wearer dry. Wool and some synthetics retain their insulating properties even when wet.

Hypothermia can strike at any time of year, but is easily avoided if your pack holds clothing to shield you from exposure and you are aware of its symptoms.

Avoiding Hypothermia

Hypothermia is easily avoided if you guard against dehydration, fatigue, cold winds, and wet clothes, and if you are aware of the symptoms. Hypothermia happens when your core body temperature falls below normal, which can happen easily when you are exposed to cold winds or wetness. Your body automatically begins to shiver to rewarm itself. As your energy is used up to keep warm, you may reach a point where your body will be unable to rewarm by itself. If left untreated, your body will gradually shut down and you can die.

Symptoms of Hypothermia

Early signs of hypothermia include shivering. Progressive symptoms include slurred speech, loss of coordination, confusion, apathy, and irrational behavior.

This dangerous condition can be avoided if you:

1. Dress warmly and in layers. Avoid wearing cotton.

2. Stay dry.
3. Protect yourself from wind. (This can be done most effectively by wearing outer layers of clothes that block wind and moisture.)
4. Eat high-energy snacks and drink plenty of water.
5. Do not over-exert yourself.

Treating Hypothermia

If you recognize hypothermia in someone, move the person to shelter, remove wet clothes, and replace them with warm, dry garments. If the person is alert enough to hold a cup, give warm liquids to drink. Never give food or drink to a person who is not conscious; he or she may choke. To help speed rewarming, place the person in a pre-warmed sleeping bag. **If the person is unconscious, seek medical help immediately, before rewarming.**

Eating Right

Hiking and other outdoor activities require a greater amount of energy than many people realize. Prior to your hike, indulge in a carbohydrate-rich meal. Equally important is to munch on high-energy snacks and drink water along the way. Don't wait until you feel hungry or thirsty. Adopt a pattern of "sip and nibble." Eat a handful of trail mix and drink water frequently. This will keep your energy level fairly constant. Trail mix (nuts, raisins, and other dried fruit) is a good high-energy snack. Carry plenty of water. You should consume two to four quarts per day while hiking.

Stay on the Trail

Each year, people get lost in the mountains and become the subjects of search-and-rescue missions. In most cases, people simply wandered off marked trails and lost their bearings.

It is very important to bring a map and compass and to know how to use them. If you've wandered off the path stop immediately. In many cases, you can retrace your footsteps and get yourself back to the trail. If not, follow these steps:

1. Stop and assess the situation
2. Stay calm. If you don't stay calm, you can't think straight. If you can't think straight, you won't be able to help yourself.
3. Orient yourself. Use your map and compass. If you have no map or compass, remember; the sun rises in the east and sets in the west. Familiarize yourself with major landmarks before you set out.
4. If you still can't find the trail, follow a river or stream downstream. You will eventually come to civilization.
5. If you're lost above treeline, try to follow cairns along the trail.
6. If nightfall approaches and you don't know where you are, it is usually wiser to stay put and try to find your way out in the daylight.

If you have a whistle, blow it in bursts of three. The sound may attract help. (The sound from a whistle travels farther and is located more easily than the sound of a shout.)

Your Pack is a Survival Kit

Hikers should always carry a day pack – even for short hikes – containing:

- A wool sweater or synthetic pile jacket
- Hat and gloves or mittens

- Bandanna or handkerchief
- Long pants (avoid cotton)
- Wind and rain gear (jacket and pants)
- Extra socks (A welcome treat for the feet at mid-hike, or if you inadvertently step in a stream. They also double as mittens)
- Polypropylene or wool underwear is recommended. Polypropylene insulates and keeps you dry by transporting moisture from perspiration away from your skin. Wool and polypro retain their ability to insulate, even when wet.

Other essential gear includes:

- First-aid kit
- Waterproof matches or lighter
- Whistle
- Knife
- Guidebook, trail map, and compass
- High-energy snacks
- 2-4 quarts (per person) of water
- A flashlight or headlamp with fresh batteries
- Sunscreen and insect repellent
- Trash bags
- Carry a sleeping bag in case you are forced to sleep out overnight. If you're traveling in a group, carry at least one sleeping bag. It is an emergency tool that can keep an injured hiker warm until help arrives. Hypothermia is more of a threat when you sit immobilized because of an injury.
- Be sure to wear sturdy, well broken-in boots

Many of the items listed above are available for purchase at our facilities. Our frontcountry facilities carry a selection of books, maps, and souvenir items as well as a small selection of t-shirts, fleece tops, hats, gloves, packs, etc. At the Huts and Hermit Lake Shelters there are small stores where you can also purchase items that you may have forgotten as well as the ever-popular hut-specific products (t-shirts - synthetic and cotton, fleece, ball-caps, pins and patches, etc). All of our facilities accept cash, check, MC/Visa/AMEX.

About the AMC

Founded in 1876, the nonprofit Appalachian Mountain Club promotes the protection, enjoyment, and wise use of the mountains, rivers, and trails of the Appalachian region. With membership approaching 100,000 and regional chapters from Maine to Washington, D.C., the AMC encourages the involvement of all people in its mission and activities through its membership, facilities, programs, policies, and procedures. Our goal is to be a community that is comfortable, inviting, and accessible for people of any age, gender, race, religion, ethnicity, ability, sexual orientation, or socioeconomic status.

For More Information

The AMC offers workshops, educational programs, and lodging at huts, shelters, camps, and lodges throughout the Northeast. The AMC's programs and facilities are open to all. For more information, or to find out how you can support AMC's work through membership, call (603) 466-2721 or (617) 523-0636. You can access the AMC's website at www.outdoors.org.