

Why The Ten Essentials?

The mountains and rivers of the Northwest have something to offer just about everyone: enjoyment of nature, exercise, adventure, challenge and inspiration. Whether you hike, study the flora and fauna, mountain bike, backpack, scramble or pursue more technical sports such as rock climbing or ski mountaineering, there is always some risk involved. Anyone heading outside should understand the risks and prepare for them. This is where the Ten Essential Systems come in handy.

What are the “Ten Essential Systems?” They are simply a collection of items that have proven useful and are recommended for every outdoor trip, whether traveling on trails or heading into backcountry wilderness. Experienced hikers, climbers and scramblers usually keep these items in their packs at all times, and each member of the party carries his or her own.

Some items on the list of systems are things you will always want to have. Everyone needs water and food, for example, to keep their body going. Insulation is extremely important in the Northwest, where weather can change in an instant. Don't be afraid to take an extra layer of clothing.

Other items you may not always need, but it's still a good idea to bring them along. Navigation tools are helpful for unfamiliar destinations, even if you only plan to hike on trails. A flashlight or other illumination might come in handy if your outing goes later than planned. And even though it looks cloudy, sun protection can help avoid those UV rays that sometimes penetrate cloud layers.

Last, a few items on the list are things that you hope to never use, and don't require too much explanation. A first aid kit for cuts, wounds and insect bites. Emergency shelter and fire in case of unforeseen circumstances. And a repair kit for that broken strap, torn tent or snapped shoelace.

The basic principles here are just for starters. Ask questions and observe more seasoned hikers, read books, and most of all, apply common sense. Then pack up and get on the trail!

The Ten Essentials

A systems approach

1. Navigation

It's a good idea to carry a map and compass - and know how to use them. USGS, Custom Correct and Green Trails maps all provide useful topographic information, and the latter two show relatively up-to-date trail info. Even if you don't plan on leaving the trail, being prepared is essential.

2. Sun Protection

Sunglasses, sunscreen and hats are smart items to carry year-round. While the benefits are obvious on a sunny summer day, these items are useful against glare and sunburn while traveling on snow or under cloudy skies where UV rays may still penetrate.

3. Insulation

Pack extra clothing, in anticipation of the worst possible conditions you could encounter on your trip. Weather can change quickly, and it's not uncommon for temperature (and precipitation) to vary significantly between the trailhead and higher elevations. If done smartly, these items won't add too much weight to your pack.

Items you should carry (avoid cotton):

- fleece or wool sweater
- water resistant shell (such as nylon or gore-tex)
- extra hat (wool or fleece)
- mittens or gloves
- extra socks (synthetic or wool)

4. Illumination

It can get dark sooner than you think when you're on the trail, so having a flashlight or headlamp is handy. Headlamps also have the benefit of leaving your hands free. When choosing batteries, consider using rechargeable, and always carry extras. Make sure the light won't turn on by itself, and is accessible in case you need to find it in the dark.

5. First-aid supplies

A good first aid kit doesn't need to be big and bulky, and you probably have many of the basic items around the house. Outdoor stores sell a range of kits that vary from a small “envelope” type kit to the larger “box” kits. Depending on the length of your trip and the size of your pack, you can adjust the contents as needed.

Basic first aid kit items:

- Band aids - mainly large fabric type; include butterfly/finger
- gauze pads and roll
- adhesive or athletic tape (to hold gauze in place)
- small tweezers
- moleskin (good for blisters)

- one athletic compression bandage
- one or more triangle bandage (think arm sling)
- antibacterial ointment (small tube is plenty)
- OTC painkiller (e.g. Advil or Tylenol)
- OTC antihistamine (e.g. Benedryl)
- extra supply (2 days) of any prescription medicine

You don't need to take full bottles or rolls! Zip-type bags work great for small objects. Consider taking a first aid course. Workplaces often offer a basic first aid course for employees, and The Mountaineers offer MOFA.

6. Fire

Temperatures can drop significantly overnight, and having a means to start an emergency fire will help ensure you maintain warmth if necessary. Waterproof matches, butane lighters and firestarters (candle stubs, chemical heat tabs, canned heat) should be reliable. If you are headed where there may be very little firewood, an ultralight stove is a good source of heat.

7. Repair kit and tools

Anything to repair the gear and/or equipment you will be carrying. There are a number of multi-tools on the market, along with the standard swiss army knife. Other items to consider: shoelaces, safety pins, needle and thread, cable ties, wire, duct tape and nylon fabric repair tape.

8. Nutrition

Even if only heading out for a day hike, nutrition is an important factor in your well being. In addition to your lunch and snacks, pack a few extra compact food items in case your trip is unexpectedly extended. Choose no-cook foods: fig bars, cheese, nuts, bagles, candy bars, energy bars or packets, etc...

9. Hydration

Extra water. Many people forget that we all need a plentiful supply of water each day, and especially when our body is expending extra energy. 1 liter is a minimum quantity for a short day hike; 2.5 liters for an all-day excursion. Take hot weather and the strenuousness of your outing into account. More heat or effort means more water. And it's not advisable to rely solely on water sources near the trail. If you must use these, be sure to pack a reliable water purification system.

10. Emergency shelter

Most day hikers shouldn't need to carry a tent with them. However, you should pack an emergency space blanket. Most of these that are commercially available fold down to a wallet-sized packet. For the budget minded, a jumbo-sized plastic trash bag can also be used to keep out wind and rain.

Hiking Safety

PLANNING

Look at the route description in a guide book before setting out. Note hiking time, route conditions (rocky, exposed, dry, wet). Pack food, clothing, water and gear accordingly. Check the weather forecast, look at a map and visit the nearest ranger station or visitor center.

LEAVE THE TRIP SCHEDULE...

...with at least one responsible person. Give the name of the trail or a route description, names of people in your party, and expected time of return. Remember to call this person when you get back.

THE HIKING PARTY

The rule of thumb for newcomers is “don't hike alone.” A group of three is usually minimum for backcountry trails. However, once they have experience, many people do like to hike alone. If you choose to hike solo, the need for training and equipment becomes more important.

STAY WITH YOUR GROUP

When hiking with a group, do not gallop ahead or wander off by yourself at rest stops. The other will be peeved if they have to search for you, and there is an increasing possibility that others will *really* become lost.

DRESS APPROPRIATELY

Even on the warmest summer day, it is NOT a good idea to take just cotton shorts and t-shirts. Synthetic clothing is recommended because it wicks perspiration and dries faster if wet by rain. The Mountaineers recommends lug-soled hiking boots for all hike participants because they provide good support, traction and protection.

FITNESS

To ensure a fun trip, and out of consideration for others in your party, select trips of a distance and grade that are suitable to your current level of conditioning.

GET TRAINING

Do you really know how to use a map and compass? Can you interpret changing weather, splint a broken ankle, and build a fire from wet wood? If not, get some training. Classes in navigation, wilderness travel and first aid are available through The Mountaineers at a reasonable cost. All are welcome.