

How to Pack 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.

This article offers packing tips and explains the proper way to hoist your pack when it's full. 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

Packs differ in what they provide—lid pockets, front pockets, side pockets and hipbelt pockets. Some pockets even have a lot of smaller pockets inside. All of these options help you organize smaller essentials:

- 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:

- 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.