

BUILD A BETTER BACKCOUNTRY FIRST AID KIT

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Creating a personal wilderness first aid kit means balancing portability, preparedness, and your specific needs. Here's a comprehensive guide to building your own kit—whether you're day hiking, backpacking, or venturing deep into the backcountry.

It is best practice to build your own kit rather than purchase an off-the-shelf kit. Understanding what should go in a wilderness first aid kit starts with training in Wilderness First Aid (WFA) or Wilderness First Responder (WFR), which goes beyond training aimed at urban or industrial settings. Make sure the kit is readily identifiable and easily accessible; placing it at the top of your pack is a good location. When possible, use the patient's first aid kit contents.

Documentation

- First aid manual or wilderness-specific reference card. First aid guides can also be downloaded to a smartphone. The Mazamas offers a First Aid pocket guide through Mazama online merchandise.
- Waterproof notebook and pencil (for recording injuries, vitals). Mazama leaders are required to carry the Mazama S.O.A.P. note.
- Emergency contact and medical info card.

Personalization tips

- Trip length: Add more supplies for multi-day trips.
- Group size: More people means more supplies.
- Conditions: Snow? Bring foot warmers. Heat? Add hydration tools.
- Experience level: If you're WFA/WFR certified, carry gear you know how to use (e.g., splinting tools, triangular bandages).
- Allergies/conditions: Include personal medications or anaphylaxis kits.



Packing and storage

- Use a waterproof pouch or dry bag (red or marked with a cross for visibility).
- Organize with zip-top bags or internal dividers:
 - Documentation
 - Body Substance Isolation
 - Bleeding/Wounds
 - Musculoskeletal
 - Medications
 - Blister/Burns
 - Tools
- Add a checklist inside the kit for easy restocking.

Final tips

- Check your kit before each trip. Medications expire and bandages degrade.
- Know how to use everything you pack. Training matters more than gear.
- Consider a Wilderness First Aid course from the Mazamas, NOLS, or the Red Cross. Additional training in CPR, EpiPen use, and Stop the Bleed can be helpful.

First Aid Kit

- Bag #1: Protection
 - Purpose: A waterproof bag ensures your medical supplies aren't ruined or made non-sterile in case of submersion.
 - Contents:
 - ▷ Bag #2
 - ▷ Bag #3
- Bag #2: Preparation
 - Purpose: Contains items to prepare before treatment begins, including Body Substance Isolation (BSI) and record-keeping, so the rescuer can begin the patient assessment prepared.
 - Contents:
 - ▷ Body Substance Isolation:
 - ▷ Gloves (two or three pairs)
 - ▷ Masks (two or three): For both the patient and rescuer
 - Record-keeping:
 - ▷ S.O.A.P. notes (two or three)
 - ▷ For tracking findings and a plan of action for patients
 - ▷ One full page

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Kit, continued from previous page.

- ▷ Two smaller, printed on waterproof paper for rainy or snowy conditions
 - Mini mechanical pencils
 - ▷ For writing S.O.A.P. notes
 - ▷ Mechanical pencils won't break easily when packed
 - Pocket guide: A resource for the patient assessment sequence, how to speak with authorities, and how to diagnose and treat common ailments.
- Bag #3: First Aid Kit
- Purpose: Contains medical supplies to properly treat patients.
 - Contents:
 - ▷ Bleeding:
 - ▷ Combine pads: thick pads used to help control major bleeding
 - ▷ QuikClot: gauze with a clotting agent to help control bleeding
 - ▷ Regular gauze: helps control bleeding and clean wounds
 - ▷ Non-adherent gauze: applied to open wounds so dressings don't remove skin when changed
 - ▷ Roll gauze: helps control bleeding, clean wounds, and wrap wounds
 - Musculoskeletal injury:
 - ▷ Triangular bandage: sling and swath; to help create splints; to help control bleeding
 - ▷ ACE bandage: used to wrap usable injuries, help create splints, and cover wounds
 - ▷ Coban: self-adhering bandage to cover wounds, wrap usable injuries, and help create splints
 - ▷ Flexible medical tape: for wrapping usable ankles and creating an occlusive dressing
 - Wound management:
 - ▷ Antiseptic towelettes: for cleaning around a wound
 - ▷ Povidone-iodine swabs/pads: for disinfecting inside wounds
 - ▷ Sting pad: used to clean sting or bite sites and provide some pain relief
 - ▷ Benzoin tincture: helps tape, Steri-Strips, and bandages adhere to the skin—especially around difficult areas like the eyes or mouth
 - Medication:
 - ▷ Aspirin: for pain, fever reducer, cold and flu discomfort, muscle and joint pain, cramps; cardiac chest pain. Notes: some people are allergic
 - ▷ Tylenol: for pain, fever reducer, cold and flu discomfort, muscle and joint pain, cramps
 - ▷ Ibuprofen: pain, fever reducer, cold and flu discomfort, muscle and joint pain, cramps; inflammation. Note: can be used in conjunction with Tylenol for effective over-the-counter pain relief
 - ▷ Benadryl: temporary relief of allergy symptoms
 - ▷ modium: helps control diarrhea
 - ▷ Antacid: controls heartburn and upset stomach
 - ▷ Medication checklist (WFR only): process for which medication, dosage, and frequency to use before recommending medication to a patient; write each medication's expiration date in wax pencil to update easily when refilling
 - General:
 - ▷ Compact CPR face shield: to provide breaths to a patient if needed; a one-way valve protects the rescuer from bodily fluids
 - ▷ Trauma shears: for removing clothing from a patient without injuring them
 - ▷ Fever scanner/thermometer: for taking a patient's temperature and monitoring over time
 - Optional
 - ▷ Purpose: Items to add or subtract based on the owner's specific concerns for an outing.
 - Contents:
 - ▷ Tourniquet: for stopping heavy bleeding when direct pressure doesn't work
 - ▷ Nuun electrolyte tabs: to help patients struggling with hyponatremia
 - ▷ Powdered gelatin (e.g., Jell-O): for patients with hypoglycemia to raise blood sugar; for patients with hypothermia—or to help prevent shock—add to hot water and have the patient drink (only if they can do so on their own)
 - ▷ Instant glucose: for people experiencing hypoglycemia
 - ▷ Soap sleeves: to clean your hands, clean around a wound, and clean instruments
 - ▷ Hand warmers: can help with hypothermia or frostnip

AI Disclosure: Generative artificial intelligence was used to assist with research and compilation of this article. All content has been reviewed, fact-checked, and approved by the First Aid Committee to ensure accuracy and adherence to our editorial standards.