

How to Pack a Backpack

Packing a backpack is pretty simple, but there are some tips to make the process easier and to get you better results.

Ideally, a well-loaded pack will feel balanced when resting on your hips and nothing should be shifting or swaying inside. As you walk, the pack should feel stable and predictable, one with your upper body.

If possible, first pack your backpack at home. You can spread out your gear on a clean floor, visually confirm you've got everything, and feel less rushed as you load up.

Use the equipment checklist to ensure you've got everything you need.

Backpack Access

Most backpacks feature a **top-loading** opening to reach the main compartment. Some packs also offer a **zippered front panel** that folds open, exposing the full interior of the pack, or a side zipper, which also makes it easier to reach items deeper in your pack.

Your pack might also feature a **sleeping bag compartment**, a zippered stash spot near the bottom of the bag. It's a useful feature if you don't want to use a stuff sack for your sleeping bag. Alternately, this space can hold other gear that you'd like to reach easily.

Packing the Bottom of Your Backpack

The bottom of the pack is where you should stash items you won't need until you make camp at night. Most hikers shove their sleeping bag into the bottom of the pack. This is also where you might keep long underwear being used as sleepwear, and a sleeping pad (if it rolls up into a tiny shape).

Any other needed-only-at-night items can go down low except a headlamp or flashlight. Always have your light source in a readily accessible space.

Packing the Core of Your Backpack

Heavier items should be centered in your pack—not too high, not too low. The goal is to create a predictable, comfortable center of gravity. Heavy items too low cause a pack to feel saggy. Too high and the load might feel tippy.

Your heaviest items should be placed on top of your sleeping bag and close to your spine. Usually these items will be your **food , water, first aid**. Wrap softer, lower-weight items around the weightier items to prevent heavier pieces from shifting. Your rain jacket can help stabilize the core and fill empty spaces.

Hydration reservoir: Most newer packs include a hydration reservoir sleeve. This is a slot that holds a reservoir close to your back and parallel to your spine. It's easier to insert the reservoir while the pack is still mostly empty.

Packing the Top and Periphery of your Backpack

Top lid: Many packs offer a zippered top lid. You can stash frequently used items and keep them within easy reach. This might include, compass, GPS, sunscreen, sunglasses, headlamp, bug spray, first-aid kit, snacks, rain gear, packcover, toilet paper and sanitation trowel. You can also place these in external pockets, if you have them. Some packs even offer small pockets on the hipbelt.

Sleeping pad: You may need an extra set of straps to attach it to a lash point on the top of the pack or near your waistline on the outside of the pack. Another option: put it beneath your top pocket (lid) and the top opening of the pack, then tighten the lid to the pack. The pad may be vulnerable to slipping out either side, so secure the pad to the pack with an extra strap or two. (Note: It's fine to carry tent poles and a sleeping pad inside a pack if you have the space.)

Trekking poles: Same deal; just put the grips in the pocket and the tips pointing upward.

Other tools: Some packs offer a series of external stitched loops called a daisy chain. Use it to clip or tie small items on your pack.

Note: Minimize the amount of gear you attach to your pack's exterior. External items can potentially get snagged on brush in areas of dense vegetation. Too much external gear could also jeopardize your stability.

Additional Packing Tips

Fill up all empty spaces. For example, put utensils, a cup or a small item of clothing inside your eating bowl.

Stuff sacks: Some may prefer the low-chaos/easy-organization of stuff sacks, while others simply prefer to pack soft items loosely in the pack to use up all available room. Experiment with your own gear and decide which method most appeals to you.

Compression straps: Tighten all compression straps to limit load-shifting.

Rain cover: Carry a pack rain cover and keep it easily accessible. Though some backpacks are made with waterproof fabric, they have seams and zippers that are vulnerable to seepage during a downpour. A pack cover is worth its weight when rain becomes persistent.

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Fitting your Backpack

First, loosen all of the pack's straps and hipbelt. Start by putting about 10 to 15 lbs. of weight into the pack to simulate a loaded pack. If making these pack adjustments at home, follow the steps below in front of a mirror. Get a friend to help if possible.

Step 1: Hipbelt

- Put the pack on your back so that the hipbelt is resting over your hip bones.
- Close the hipbelt buckle and tighten it.
- Check the padded sections of the hipbelt to make sure they wrap around your hips comfortably. Keep at least 1" of clearance on either side of the centre buckle.
- If the hipbelt is too loose or tight, try repositioning the hipbelt buckle. If this doesn't solve the problem, you may need a different pack (or hipbelt).

Step 2: Shoulder Straps

- Pull down and back on the ends of the shoulder straps to tighten them.
- Shoulder straps should fit closely to hold the pack body against your back and thus keeping the load forward. They should NOT be carrying the weight.
- Have your helper check to see that the shoulder strap anchor points are 1" to 2" inches below the top of your shoulders.

Step 3: Load Lifters

- Load-lifter straps are located just below the tops of your shoulders (near your collarbones) and should angle back toward the pack body at a 45° angle.
- Gently snug the load-lifter straps to pull weight off your shoulders. (Overtightening the load lifters will cause a gap to form between your shoulders and the shoulder straps.)

Step 4: Sternum Strap

- Adjust the sternum strap as needed to a comfortable height across your chest.
- Buckle the sternum strap and tighten until the shoulder straps are pulled inwards comfortably from your shoulders, allowing your arms to move freely.
- Pull the stabilizer straps located on either side of the hipbelt to snug the pack body toward the hipbelt and stabilize the load.

Final Tweaks

- Pull the stabilizer straps, if equipped, located on either side of the hipbelt to snug the pack body toward the hipbelt and stabilize the load.

- Go back to the shoulder straps and carefully take a bit of tension off of them. This ensures the majority of the weight is carried by your hips.



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