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Make a plan, pack a bag, bring a buddy Take a walk on the safe side this summer

**By Mollie Miller
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This summer, thousands will lace up their hiking boots, swing their packs on to their backs and hit nature trails around the country to experience the beauty of America's great outdoors.

Whether a summer trip into the great outdoors is as short as a few hours or as long as a week, there are three steps every adventurer should take before their boots ever touch the trail, according to Mike Wood, safety specialist at the U.S. Army Combat Readiness/Safety Center.

"Everyone who is thinking about taking hiking trip this summer needs to start by making a plan, packing a bag and bringing a buddy," Wood said. "It takes a little time to get ready for a safe trip but taking the time in the beginning will save a lot of time later by avoiding injury."

Make a plan

The best way to prevent an accident while on a nature adventure is to simply stay out of trouble in the first place, according to the Boy Scouts of America Guide to Safe Scouting.

The Guide to Safe Scouting notes that staying out of trouble while out in the wild requires planning and a good understanding of the environment.

"The plan gets the hiker thinking seriously about what they are getting into," Wood said.

A good hiking plan will include information like departure and return times, emergency phone numbers, the hike route, and locations and phone numbers for medical assistance, lodges and park rangers. The plan should also include a list of equipment needed for the outdoor adventure.

"You have to have a plan," Wood said. "Make a written plan and leave a copy with someone else so, in case something happens, they know when you were supposed to return and where you were going to go and can call for help."

A good plan should also include information about current weather conditions and what to expect during the hike or campout. If, in the planning process, a hiker or camper discovers that severe weather is forecasted for the area, reschedule the trip – bad weather can be a hiker's biggest enemy.



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“If the forecast calls for a serious storm, reschedule the hike for another day,” Wood said. “You do not want to be caught in the forest in the middle of a lightning storm.”

Pack a bag

The National Park Service recommends every hiker’s pack include extra clothing like gloves and a jacket; sun screen and sun glasses; fully charged cell phone; bug spray; energy bars, fruit and granola; a map of the area and compass; flashlight; first aid kit; pocket knife; and a lighter.

The pack should also include plenty of water because although stream or lake water might look inviting, the cleanliness of the water is probably debatable and it is safer just to drink bottled water.

Wood said although the contents of a hiker’s pack might vary depending on where they are going and how long they will be gone, everyone should always carry at least the basics like a map, water, food, a flashlight and a cell phone to sustain them in the event of an emergency.

Bring a buddy

Hiking with a friend or family member not only makes a hike more fun but also makes it safer.

Wood said hiking with a buddy creates a safer environment by making sure that there is always at least one person available to help or go for help if something goes wrong.

“If you were alone on a hike and fell and injured yourself, there would be no one there to help,” he said.

The Boy Scouts of America recommend hikers, whether in teams of two or teams of 20, stay together on well-established trails and avoid loose rocks, dangerous ledges and cliffs. Further, the hikers should stay away from wild animals and make plenty of noise to avoid surprising any animals they might encounter.

While there is nothing quite like experiencing nature up close while on a hike, the goodness of the wild retreat will be lost if someone is injured, lost or killed. Remember to make a plan, pack a bag and bring a buddy this summer.

For more information about hiking and camping in national parks, visit www.nps.gov. For more information about the Army’s Safe Summer Campaign, visit <https://safety.army.mil>.