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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 Tracey Russell, a Safety Specialist at the U.S. Army Combat Readiness/Safety Center.

"If you plan to hit the trails this summer, make a plan, pack a bag and bring a buddy," Russell said. "It takes a little time to get ready for a safe trip but the extra time now will save a lot of time later by avoiding illness, injury or loss."

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.

"Making a plan gets the hiker thinking about all the possible things that could happen during an outdoor adventure," Russell 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.

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.

"You do not want to be caught in the forest in the middle of a lightning storm," Russell said.



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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 debateable and it is safer just to drink bottled water.

Russell 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 a map, water, food, a flashlight and a charged 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.

Russell said buddy hiking creates a safer environment by ensuring there is always at least one person available to help or go for help if something goes wrong.

"If you were hiking alone and fell and injured yourself, there would be no one there to help," she said.

The Boy Scouts of America recommend that 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 and personal 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>.

