



# Guide to Day Hiking: Getting Started

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This guide is designed to assist you in planning to go on your first day hike, in planning a hike of your own and in leading a group hike. While written with the greater New York City area in mind, most information is general and applies elsewhere.

What this page can not do is figure out what shape you are in, your first aid skills, your orienteering (map & compass) skills and whether you have much common sense. This is your responsibility!

**WARNING/DISCLAIMER:** Hiking can be dangerous and the information furnished below may contain errors!

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## **Getting Started: What to Bring and Wear** (and buying guide)

### **What Everyone Should Bring on a Hike**

1. **Water** - 2+ liters (no glass bottles).
2. **Hiking boots** (or sneakers with an aggressive tread pattern for some easier hikes)
3. **Sunscreen**
4. **Sunglasses**
5. **Hat** - especially in cold weather.
6. **Lunch** - and extra food for snacks (or emergencies).
7. **Daypack** for lunch and water
8. **Rain gear** - just in case
9. **Non-cotton base layer** (in cold weather especially) - polypropylene or the equivalent (the phrase "cotton kills" applies in cold weather).
10. **Plastic Bag** - to pack out any trash.

### **Nice to Have on a Hike**

1. **\*Cellular Phone** - for emergencies
  2. **Global Positioning System (GPS) receiver** - latest high-tech toy, no substitute for having basic map & compass skills as well as a regular map & compass (batteries can fail!).
  3. **Camera**
  4. **Binoculars**
  5. **\*Compass**
  6. **\*Map**
  7. **\*\*First Aid kit**
  8. **Trekking Poles**
  9. **Traction Devices for Ice** - when appropriate (i.e. Stabilicers)
- \*If you are on your own then this item falls into the "should" category (above).
- \*\*If you are on your own then use your best judgment as to what to bring (at the minimum, the author always carries bandages and ibuprofen).

### **What Not to Bring**

1. **Dog** (call for permission in hiking area, not always permitted)

### **What A Hike Leader Should Bring**

1. **Compass** - don't leave home without a good quality one that you know how to use.
2. **Map** - if I have to explain why,...
3. **First Aid kit**
4. **List of everyone present** (for large groups).

**Hiking Boots** - Proper fit is the most important feature of a good hiking boot. Shop for them using the socks you intend to wear them with (see [sock](#) section below). Shop late in the day as people's feet swell naturally as the day wears on. Outdoor gear stores that sell hiking boots generally have a small ramp to use to test your boots on. The purpose is to make sure that your toes don't hit the front of the boot (ouch!) when walking downhill - very important! Finding a salesperson with real experience fitting hiking boots can be a real advantage. Friends of the author have been happy at EMS stores in Manhattan since they generally have well trained staff in the shoe department.

Breathability and waterproofness are both important. Membranes are designed into better hiking boots that keep your feet dry when walking in water (or snow) while allowing your feet to breath. The most famous fabric that accomplishes this is called [Gore-Tex](#). This author highly recommends boots with a Gore-Tex membrane. A good pair of hiking boots should last much longer than an average pair of shoes or sneakers and this should (hopefully) justify the price of better boots.

Why not wear sneakers when hiking? Many people are happy in sneakers and on hikes over easy terrain carrying lighter loads this might work well. If you walk over anything but easy terrain and with anything but a light load you will quickly realize the advantages of real hiking boots. The advantages include better support, comfort and stability when walking over anything but flat terrain (i.e. rocky terrain), protection from odd shaped rocks and roots on the trail bed and increased safety from injury. Once people experience the advantages of hiking boots, they generally are very glad they have bought them.

**Socks** - The type of socks you wear with your hiking boots is critical to your comfort. Traditionally a thin liner sock made of polypropylene is worn next to your skin. A thick rag wool sock is worn over this. Wear both of these (late in the day since feet swell as the day goes on) when you shop for hiking boots. I wear this combination of socks all year round.

Why these two socks? Your foot has more sweat pores per square inch than any other part of your body. Thin polypropylene based sock liners wick this moisture away from your skin and do not absorb moisture while doing this. The air pockets in a thick rag wool sock allow the moisture to evaporate. Thick rag wool socks cushion your foot against the

laces and tongue of your boot as well as other parts of the boot and provides insulation in the winter. Wool also maintains its insulating properties while wet. Wearing two pairs of socks allows them to rub against each other and not your foot when your foot moves within the boot.

There are a number of modern fabric socks designed for hiking that do not precisely follow the two-sock formula I have outlined above. Some work better than others and some work very well.

**Day/Backpack Features** - People carry all sorts of packs for dayhiking. In this section I will discuss some features I think are worth having or at least worth considering when purchasing a backpack (as I have never gotten used to wearing a fanny pack, I will not discuss them here, some people love them, some not). Most people carry packs for dayhiking that are between 1500 and 2500 cubic inches in volume (the author used to carry a [Gregory](#) that was 2250 and now carries a [Kelty](#) Redwing that is 2400 cubic inches in volume).

A pack's hip belt (preferably a properly and well padded one) serves at few important purposes. They include preventing the pack from swaying from side to side and away from your back when you are in other than a normal upright position. A good hip belt also allows you to carry part (or almost all) of the weight of the pack on your hips instead of your shoulders. The distribution of weight between you hips and shoulders can easily be varied by pulling or loosening the shoulder straps. Generally this allows the pack to hang off your back with only a small section resting against your lower back/hips. I also allows air to circulate between the pack and your back which is much more comfortable as sweat then has a much better chance to evaporate if the pack is not leaning against your back all the time

A hip belt works in conjunction with the somewhat stiff and padded back of a good pack. The stiff pack back is attached to the hip belt and shoulder straps and gives the pack the structural rigidity needed for it to hang away from your back without collapsing against your back. A padded pack back also prevents sharp objects in the pack from sticking you in the back.

Better stores will usually have weighted objects (i.e. bean bags) meant to be put into the pack to give you the sensation of carrying a loaded pack. This can be a very worthwhile exercise! I recommend putting a minimum of 10 pounds into the pack to simulate dayhiking uses (2 -3 liters of water and other gear).

While overkill, it is worthwhile and educational to closely examine and try on large (3500 - 6000 cubic inch, the bigger the better) back packs to see what full blown pack suspension systems are like and can do. This exercise will probably give you a better idea of what to look for in a suspension system for a dayhiking backpack. One top end name brand to look for is [Gregory](#).

**Layering: What is this?** - In colder weather months and in inclement weather more than a simple cotton T-shirt is necessary. The conventional wisdom is to have a [non-cotton base layer](#) against your skin. Above this, according to temperature, needs to be insulating materials. The most famous ones are made of fleece and wool. Both do a great job of insulating. The final layer is called a "shell" and may be a combination of wind resistant and/or wind proof and/or water resistant and/or water proof.

Better shells are breathable so that you do not soak in your own sweat. The best known breathable and wind and water proof shells are made with Gore-Tex membranes. The author has had excellent experience with shells made with Gore-Tex. They can be very expensive but they last a long time.

Various insulating and shell garments have various zippers (i.e. armpit or "pit" zippers) designed to increase the ability of the garment to breathe. These may look like gimmicks to the uninitiated but they are very very valuable and are highly recommended features to look for.

**Non-cotton base layers** - Examples include garments made from polypropylene as well as a variety of proprietary fabrics designed to wick moisture away from your body and that are very breathable. These garments are designed to be

the "base" layer, the layer that touches your skin.

These fabrics can save your life in winter and can greatly increase your comfort in warmer weather. They generally absorb very very little moisture. In colder weather, a cotton T-shirt, when wet from moisture or rain, will lose all insulating properties and cause you to shiver. Cotton clothing also takes a long time to dry. During warmer weather months, these garments are more comfortable because they will absorb much less perspiration than cotton.

Examples of non-cotton base layer garments include those made by a multiple of manufacturers using polypropylene. This is generally the cheapest fabric in this category. Other proprietary fabrics, each with their own advantages and sold as finished garments, include Patagonia Capilene, Terramar EC2, and other fabrics by Duofold, The North Face, Mountain Hardwear, EMS, REI, L. L. Bean, and others.

Proprietary fabrics each claim various advantages. They include less odor retention, less piling after repeated wearing and washes, superior feel and presentability (this last one is subjective). They also significantly increase the variety of styles and colors available. Non-cotton base layers can cost much more than plain cotton based garments but they generally last a very long time as they are generally much stronger than cotton. They are generally also lighter in weight than equivalent legacy fabric garments.

These garments are generally most effective when worn somewhat tightly against your skin as in most cases it is their movement against your skin that helps them wick moisture away from it. If modesty is an issue then I recommend a loose breathable garment be worn over the tighter fitting base layer.

While there are many excellent manufacturers and fabrics, this author has used garments made out of polypropylene, Patagonia Capilene, Coolmax (i.e. Duofold Coolmax Alta), and Terramar EC2 and have found them all to be effective. Personally I prefer the ones not made from polypropylene as the other proprietary fabrics each have advantages over it (i.e. less odor retention and better presentability). A Best Buy (in March 2003) is the Terramar EC2™ Short Sleeve Crewneck which sells for \$14.00 and the Duofold Coolmax Alta which sells for no more than \$20.00 at [Campmor](#). The author has extensive experience with various Patagonia's Capilene based garments and has always been very happy with them. I have also had good experience with the other fabrics I have tried.

**Water Bottles** - These come in many shapes and sizes. Some people prefer to buy a new bottle of bottled water every time they go hiking, some re-use an old bottle, others use a water bladder (i.e. a CamelBack or Platypus) with a long plastic drinking straw and a bite valve, still others use a bottle that is meant to be used over and over again as a water bottle (i.e. a [Nalgene](#) bottle), and still others buy a bottle of their favorite beverage (avoid glass bottles!).

Water bladders have the advantage of convenience as the straw is always hanging near your mouth and you can drink without interrupting your hike. They also require the owner to be more diligent in cleaning than certain other types of water bottles.

The author has been carrying Nalgene brand bottles (the standard one-liter wide mouth size in both Lexan and plastic) for well over a decade. They (especially the Lexan ones) have a deserved reputation for ruggedness and being practicably indestructible. They can be boiled (not the cap) in water to thoroughly clean them if necessary, they have wide mouths that can accept ice cubes, they generally do not retain odors, they seal very tightly and they last a very long time. The author is still using one he estimates is over ten years old. If you are not sure what to buy then I recommend Nalgene bottles. As you do more hiking you will notice most experienced hikers either use these same Nalgene brand bottles (in plastic or Lexan) or water bladders. You will notice that virtually every outdoors oriented store in this nation sells them as they have become a de-facto standard. If in doubt, buy the one liter wide mouth size in Lexan. (And No, the author does not own stock in the company).

**Food & Water** - While no two people are the same, everyone needs to keep well hydrated (see [hydration](#) below to learn one way to tell if you are dehydrated) and filled with an appropriate amount of proteins, carbohydrates and fats in order to

function normally. There are a multiple of factors (including temperature, humidity, terrain, body mass, pack weight, and fitness level) which figure into how much food and water you will need in order to avoid becoming less hydrated and energetic than when you start your hike. One rule of thumb (and it is only that!) is that in temperate climates with modest loads and on average terrain, that most people use 100 calories per mile and 100 calories per thousand feet gained. To allow a safety margin, the author recommends always carrying more food and water than you expect to use. A much more complete discussion on this topic can be found in [The Complete Walker](#).

There are many choices of food to bring on a hike. Many times the author has seen hikers eating carrots and other fine vegetables on hikes. While these vegetables may be quite healthy, they contain far too few calories to fuel a hiker. One factor to consider is if the food you wish to bring will spoil in the weather you are hiking in. Common foods brought on a day hike include various "power" bars, bagels, "gorp", peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, fruit, and chocolate chip cookies.

The author recommends carrying at least 2 liters of water on almost any day hike and many times carries 3 liters on a long or warm weather day hike. In addition, one common trick (especially if you have a car near the trail head is to leave a liter or two of water in it) is to drink as much as possible immediately before starting the hike. This assures that you start the hike fully hydrated and means less to carry in your backpack (the authors recommendation to carry at least 2 or 3 liters of water on a day hike is in addition to the amount that may be consumed at the trailhead prior to a hike).

**Trekking Poles** - There are generally two reasons that hikers use trekking poles, to "save" their knees by reducing the stress on them and for extra help in balancing (i.e. on tricky or steep terrain and/or with very large loads to carry).

Features to look for in trekking poles include an anti-shock system where the poles are spring loaded to reduce the harshness of their impact on your hand when the poles hit the ground as you walk, the ability to collapse (they usually have telescoping sections, either two or three) to a manageable size, and a positive angle grip (a 15-degree forward leaning grip which is thought to be ergonomically superior to a straight/upright grip). Other features to consider are lighter weight poles (i.e. using titanium in the construction of the shafts), grips made with a cork like material (i.e. Leki's Cor-Tec) which seem very popular among hikers, and various systems that make height adjustments easy to make.

While the use of trekking poles is somewhat intuitive (don't poke anyone with their points!), certain aspects of their use may not be. The author was happy to learn from a video ("Adventure Buddies - Hiking Poles: Techniques and Tips Video") the correct way to adjust the straps, hold the grips (i.e. "two fingered swing", not the "death grip"), the proper length for the poles to be adjusted to, and how to hold and swing your arms and the poles. A very popular and respected brand of trekking poles is [Leki](#).

**Traction Devices for Ice** - Ice is slippery. I guess this is obvious. Trekking Poles can sometimes help help one stay upright over a slippery section of a trail. On hard ice one needs extra help. The classic method to gain traction on ice is to attach crampons to one's hiking boots. These attachments generally contain spikes (typically metal) which bite into the ice. For many day hikes, crampons are overkill. Various other devices have been invented to aid one when walking on ice. The most popular devices in use on trails in the greater NYC area seems to be a product called Stabilicers which are made by a company called [32north](#). The author has had excellent experience using these on hiking trails in the greater NYC area. Please note that the "cleats" on Stabilicers (which look suspiciously like screws one might buy in a hardware store) occasionally come out and get lost. A package of official 32north replacement cleats (typically 50 for under \$5.00) is a worthwhile investment.

**Buying Hiking Gear Locally** - [Click here to see a list of stores in the NYC area and my comments on each.](#)

## What Every Hiker Should Know

**Hydration** - How do you know if you are well hydrated and not in danger of dehydration? If the color of your urine is

clear or very light then you are well hydrated. If it is darker then you are dehydrated (the darker your urine is correlates with the more dehydrated you actually are). This is a lagging indicator so if it is dark that means that X minutes ago you were this dehydrated (which means you may actually be more dehydrated right now!). Generally one feels thirsty only after one is dehydrated to a certain degree.

**Ticks / Lyme Disease** - Basically, there are two type of ticks, deer ticks and western black-legged ticks, which can carry Lyme Disease. Of these two types of ticks, deer ticks are generally found in the northeastern part of the US. Some of these ticks carry Lyme Disease. Lyme disease carrying ticks can be smaller than a pinhead when they are born and they can infect you with Lyme disease their *entire* lives. One does not generally feel their bite and they can stay attached to a victim for 2 - 4 days, after which they drop off. The tick typically needs to be attached to the victim for at least 24 hours.

Prevention includes wearing light colored long pants (and tucking them into your socks), and long sleeves, using tick repellent and checking oneself regularly for ticks. Ticks generally come in contact with victims when the victim brushes by foliage where the tick drops off onto the victim. Ticks will generally climb on a person's body until they find a spot to bite. Generally, windswept rocks are safe to sit on and to lay your pack upon during lunch. Avoid bushwhacking to reduce your chance of contact.

There currently exists at least one approved vaccine for Lyme Disease. It is not considered to be 100% effective so diligence is still called for even if you have had the vaccine. There also are side effects that sometimes occur when taking this vaccine and the author strongly recommends hikers carefully research them to see if the benefits outweigh the problems that can be associated with these side effects. *(As of May 2002, the author has heard that the vaccine is not being actively marketed as a result of lawsuits over side effects - please research this option carefully if you are interested in pursuing it).*

The Centers for Disease Control (CDC) maintains an excellent web site on Lyme disease at <http://www.cdc.gov/ncidod/dvbid/lymeinfo.htm>. Lyme Disease is a serious disease with serious detrimental effects on the body. The author highly recommends that hikers familiarize themselves with the symptoms of this disease. Typing "Lyme Disease" into search engines such as Yahoo will generally result in a multiple of sites where this can be further researched (including the CDC's mentioned previously).

**Mosquitoes** - From personal experience and some reading I have found a few suggestions that help in minimizing mosquito bites. The most important one is to avoid areas with a high concentrations of mosquitoes. Since this is not always possible and one does not always know ahead of time whether they will encounter more than the occasional mosquito, the best one can do is to minimize looking a moving target to a mosquito. Below are some suggestions for doing this;

1. Hike in the winter (no mosquitoes!) or colder climates.
2. Wear long sleeves, pants, a hat and other clothing to cover any exposed areas of skin.
3. Do not use any scented shampoos or soaps, perfumes, cologne or anything else that would give you an odor (mosquitoes find victims by your "scent").
4. Take a shower before going hiking (see #3 for what not to use in the shower).

If you get bitten by a mosquito then do not scratch the area where it itches. Scratching the area will only worsen the itch and prolong your misery. An alternative to address the itch is to put water on it.

**Slip-Sliding Away** - Roots, especially those on downhill trails, can be among the slipperiest surfaces on a trail. Wet bridges and other flat smooth surfaces can also be very slippery.

**Getting Un-Lost (or how to find the trail you were just on)** - While many trails are well marked there are others that are less so. Even generally attentive hikers (myself included!) can find themselves on a path with the next blaze or trail

marker no where in sight. There are some generally accepted do's and don't to follow in such a situation. None is foolproof but they generally seem to work. The first thing to do is to turn around and look to see if you can see a trail marker posted for the trail for people going in the opposite direction. The next thing to do is to retrace your steps (if you can) to the last place where you recall seeing a trail marker. Even if it looks more difficult, it is generally a much more successful practice to simply retrace your steps than try and bushwhack to find the trail or to continue on hoping to come to a place you think the trail or another known landmark is.

**To Learn More** - There are many ways to learn more about hiking. In the author's opinion, the best all around book on the subject is [The Complete Walker](#) and the best general magazine on the subject is [Backpacker](#). I highly recommend both. Participating in the sport of Orienteering is a very good way to learn more about the use of a compass and a topographical map. The [U.S. Orienteering Federation](#) is a good source of information about orienteering and orienteering clubs in the US (and yes, beginners are welcome). Other worthwhile sources of information are the Internet, friends who are more experienced than you and local hiking/outdoors clubs.

## Organizing Your Own Hike

So you've gone on a few group hikes and now you want to plan a hike of your own. This section is designed to help you do just that (at least for the Greater New York City area). What this page can not do is figure out what shape you are in, your first aid skills, your orienteering (map & compass) skills and whether you have much common sense. This is your responsibility!

### Where to Start

Look at the [hike selector](#). Listed are driving directions from New York City, hiking trail notes, expected difficulty and estimated hike completion times. These notes also list what [maps](#) and [books](#) are needed for the hike.

There are some hiking areas with more services (Park Ranger stations, bathrooms,...) than others. Your first hikes should be to these areas since Park Rangers can offer accurate up-to-date advice, may sell books and area maps and offer other useful facilities. In the New York area, the [Delaware Water Gap](#) and [The Bear Mountain Inn/Park \(i.e the Bald Mountain and The Timp hike\)](#) areas offer all of these facilities as well as a variety of hiking options. [Pyramid Mountain](#) has a visitor's center and well marked trails. The [Palisades Interstate Park: Northern Section hike](#) has great views, generally well marked trails, bathrooms, a snack bar at the midpoint, and is close to New York City.

Finally, once you have the requisite experience and skills, check out [my favorite hikes](#) in the NYC area.

## Maps

Most of the best maps for the greater New York City area are published by the [New York - New Jersey Trail Conference](#). This organization is a non-profit volunteer organization which works to create and maintain hiking trails and publishes maps for them. I personally recommend these maps.

Many of these maps can be found at local [Eastern Mountain Sports \(EMS\)](#) stores, [Campmor](#), and can be ordered online from the [New York - New Jersey Trail Conference](#).

Excellent trail maps and guide books for the Appalachian Mountain Trail are published by the [Appalachian Mountain Club](#) (The NY-NJ book and maps can also be ordered online from the [New York - New Jersey Trail Conference](#)).

The United States Geological Survey publishes detailed topographic maps for the entire country.

## Books

The following books can usually be found at most larger local book stores as well as [Eastern Mountain Sports \(EMS\)](#) stores, [Campmor](#), and can be mail ordered from the [New York - New Jersey Trail Conference](#).

*The Complete Walker IV* - by Colin Fletcher and Chip Rawlins, [Alfred A. Knopf](#), New York, New York, 2002 (This book has been called "The Hiker's Bible" - a very highly recommended general book about hiking and backpacking)

[Bibliography of books about hiking in the New York City area.](#)

## Leading a Hike

**Don't Lose Anyone** - Losing people on a hike can really be a bummer. If the lost person is injured and doesn't happen to have a map, compass, cellular phone and a GPS then real trouble can occur. It can be quite embarrassing to lose someone on a hike. The following rules can usually guarantee that you will come back with the same people you started with;

1. Whoever is in front must stop at **any** intersection of the trail you are on and any other road or trail so that the leader can be sure that the correct option is selected and that everyone else in the group takes it. This may also be a good time to make sure everyone takes a drink of water and catches their breath.
2. The last person (also known as the "sweep") must never be alone. The **next-to-last** person must **always** walk within visual sight of the last person so that the chance of someone being lost or injured alone is eliminated. The next-to-last person should indicate to those in the front if there is a need to slow down so that the people in the rear can keep up. No one should walk behind the sweep.
3. Always stop the group to re-group every half hour to make sure no one is missing and to be sure that everyone is drinking water regularly. It is a good rule of thumb to make sure that everyone drinks water every half hour and has at least a snack at least once every two hours.
4. For larger groups do a count-off at the trail head before the hike begins. This way you (and others paying attention) will know exactly how many people are present. It will make your job easier to know this number than to try and remember everyone who should be present by heart. The count off is also a good opportunity to have people introduce themselves to each other.

**First Aid Kit** - There are professionally prepared and readily available ones that range in price from \$5 to \$100. Check out the variety of ones available at [Campmor](#) and/or an [EMS](#) store and make your own decisions.

**Wilderness First Aid and CPR Training** - Worth it even if you only use it once to save a life or help someone in dire need of someone with this expertise. Most reputable professional outdoor guide services require this training of their guides. Locally, in NYC, the Red Cross teaches various CPR classes. Wilderness First Aid training (not the same as the regular Red Cross first aid classes) is available through the local chapter of the [Appalachian Mountain Club \(AMC\)](#) and through [SOLO](#). The author has taken both of these and is convinced of their importance even though he has had almost no opportunity to use these skills yet (but there is this one time in the White Mountains that I found a dead body but since resurrection of the non-recently dead is not covered by these courses the training didn't help much though my cell phone did help me contact authorities quickly).

## Hiking Groups in the New York City Area

[Click here for a partial listing of organizations which offer group hikes in the New York City area and my comments on each..](#)

## My Favorite Hikes in the New York City Area

The [Hike Selector](#) can be very useful in selecting a hike that the author has researched and documented. Once you have the requisite experience, equipment (including maps!) and skills I personally recommend the following hikes (not list in any particular order);

[Schunemunk Mountain](#) - Great views and ridge walking.

[Dunderberg \(and Bald\) Mountain and the Timp](#) - Great 270 degree view from the "Timp".

[Breakneck Ridge](#) (can be accessed by train) - Fun and challenging rock scrambles, great views.

[West Mountain & Nuclear Lake \(Pawling, NY\)](#) (can be accessed by train) - Nice views and lakeside lunch spot, along the Appalachian Trail.

[Wyanokie High Point](#) - Great view.

[Delaware Water Gap](#) - Nice lake and great view over "gap".

[Lake Skenonto Circular](#) - Very nice lakeside spot for lunch and views from high points

[Storm King Mountain](#) - Very nice views.

## Useful Resources

[New York City Day Hiking](#) - Very useful website on the subject of day hiking in the greater New York City area (created by yours truly).

## Feedback / Questions

Please feel free to email [Michael Brochstein](#) with any comments, suggestions and/or questions.

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This page has been visited **12,867** times since March 3, 2003.