

Sleeping Pads

The Secret to a Restful Night on the Trail

Many hikers, especially beginners, overlook the importance of a good backpacking sleeping pad. Even if you have the best sleeping bag in the world, you can still end up spending a miserable night under the stars if you lack a sleeping pad. Every good sleep system includes a sleeping pad. First, it provides another layer of insulation between you and the cold, hard ground. When you sleep on a sleeping bag only, your body weight crushes the insulation in the sleeping bag against the ground, making it much less effective. Also, sleeping pads are important because they provide cushioning. Let's face it - the ground is usually uncomfortable. You can try to cushion yourself with by making a pile of leaves or pine needles, but using a sleeping pad has much less impact on the environment. The more comfortable you are, the better you will sleep-and the happier you'll wake up in the morning!

Now that you know why a sleeping pad is a necessity, you need to know what kinds of pads are available so that you can choose the one that's right for you. There are four types of backpacking sleeping pads on the market today: backpacking air mattresses, open-cell foam pads, closed-cell foam pads, and self-inflating pads. Each type of sleeping pad has its pros and cons.

Backpacking air mattresses are small, thin inflatable mattresses. The idea of sleeping on air after a long day on the trail may sound heavenly, but air mattresses are not always the best choice for backpacking. They are undeniably comfortable, but they have several drawbacks. The first is the possibility of leaks. Backpackers put their gear through a lot of stress, and even a durable air mattress can spring a leak. Leaks are a pain to fix in the field, especially at night, but if you don't fix it, you'll be sleeping on cold, hard ground. Backpacking air mattresses also do a poor job of insulating. The large, open space of air inside the mattress chills to outside air temperature and circulates that air underneath you. Thus, most backpacking air mattresses are only suitable for warm-weather use. Some backpacking air mattresses remedy this problem by adding insulation.

Closed-cell foam pads are the warmest type of backpacking sleeping pad available. They are also the least comfortable in that they pads provide very little in the way of cushioning. Closed-cell foam is a dense, thin foam made up of tiny closed cells that stop air circulation (retaining heat) and block water absorption. Thus closed-cell foam pads are water-repellent, warm, light, and may last forever. They are also cheap, so if you are on a budget, this is the sleeping pad for you.

Open-cell foam pads have open air cells. Open air cells can squish further so they feel softer and have more "cushion", but as a result have to be either larger or heavier to compensate. Not so good for backpacking. Also, the open air cells absorb both water and allow some air circulation, meaning they are poor insulators in cold weather and worse than useless if the ground gets wet. They are warmer than uninsulated air mattresses, and more comfortable than closed-cell foam. They are also cheap.

Self-inflating pads combine the comfort of open-cell foam pads with the warmth and weather-resistance of closed-cell foam. A self-inflating pad consists of open-cell foam covered in waterproof, airtight material. An air valve lets you inflate the mattress as much as you like-just open the valve and the open-cell foam sucks air in. They tend to be heavier than closed-cell foam and they are more expensive. Nonetheless, these pads are very popular and are probably the best choice for backpacking in terms of comfort and versatility. If you take care of them, they will give you many years of comfort and enjoyment. To help your self-inflating pad last as long as possible, store it flat with the valve open. This allows any moisture inside the foam to dry out and prevents the foam from breaking down. To minimize the amount of moisture that gets inside, allow the pad to self-inflate as much by itself as possible; then blow any additional air into it to get it to the firmness you desire.

Length and shape is another consideration. Some backpacking sleeping pads are only made to fit the upper half of your body. This saves weight, and is great for summer trips. For winter trips, however, you need a full-length pad. Also, make sure that the pad material has some texture to it so that you don't slide off.

Choosing a backpacking sleeping pad is much like choosing any other piece of gear. First, you have to consider the conditions you will be backpacking in, the features that are most important to you, and the price you are willing to pay. Then, you will be able to select the perfect sleeping pad to complete your sleep system. Pleasant dreams!