

Out Cold - Today's High-Tech Clothing And Gear Make It Easier To Stay Warm And Dry When Camping During The Winter

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When it comes to venturing outdoors in the winter, it turns out Mom was right when she said, "Dress in layers." Using a layering system of clothes remains the best way to stay warm while hiking or camping in the winter. However, technology has taken Mom's advice and improved upon it. Clothes perform more functions than just keeping a person warm. **Gore-Tex** coats can repel wind and moisture. Fleece tops can insulate. Advances in polypropylene fabrics have led to clothes that can pull moisture in the form of perspiration away from the body, keeping hikers dry. "All the biggest advancements are in the synthetic clothing," Matt Healy, the manager of Eastern Mountain Sports at Carousel Center, said. "You see it in fleece. You see it in the new polyesters. Their wicking ability is much better."

Clothing is key

Jennifer Kretser, the education director for the Adirondack Mountain Club located in Lake George, sees campers and hikers come to the Adirondack region and warns them proper clothing remains a key element in outdoor survival, especially in winter. "You're taking warm clothes, that's the first step," Kretser said. "Make sure you have lots of clothes. No cotton. You want layers of clothes." Kretser said the first layer should be made of polypropylene, a man-made fiber that doesn't absorb water. As a person sweats, the water stays on the surface of the polypropylene fibers and your body heat pushes the water to the ends of the fibers and out to where it can evaporate. This process is called wicking, and it helps prevent frostbite. "Leave the cotton at home," Kretser said. "It'll hold the moisture next to your body, stay wet and make you cold." That's true even for underwear, experts say.

Avoid overheating

A fleece pull-up, preferably one with a zipper rather than a pullover, provides an insulating middle layer. The outer layer should be a **Gore-Tex** coat, which is waterproof. **Gore-Tex** materials contain a man-made membrane with microscopic pores that allow perspiration vapor to escape, yet are too tiny to let rain penetrate. Integrated into the membrane is an oleophobic, or oil-hating, substance that prevents the penetration of contaminating substances such as oils, cosmetics, insect repellents and food. Again, look for a coat that zips up. It should even include arm-pit holes so that as a person gets hot while hiking, openings can be created without having to remove clothing. "The outer layer's very important because that's your shell," Kretser said. "You want a heavier fabric that'll block wind and repel rain and keep you warm." Mike Braia, an experienced hiker who lives in Liverpool, said despite the advances in heavy coats, it's foolish to rely on just one for protection against the cold. "**Gore-Tex** and all that doesn't matter when you get below zero," Braia said. "You've got to wear layers."

Safety for slumbering

Once a camper gets dressed for the outdoors, gear becomes essential. Everything from boots to gloves, sleeping bags to tents, trekking poles to flashlights must be packed to survive in winter. Again, technology has developed tools specifically designed for the outdoors. The sleeping bag for your teen-ager's next slumber party is not going to work in the high peaks.

In sleeping bags, there's a choice between down and synthetic. Down provides the best insulation. However, if down gets wet, it loses its ability to insulate and takes considerable time to dry. If you're picking out a down bag, look for its fill power rating. The higher the fill number, the fewer feathers it takes to fill the same space, which means a lighter, easily compacted bag.

A synthetic bag may be a little heavier than a down bag, but a synthetic resists moisture. A synthetic bag will continue to insulate even after it gets wet. Whichever type of bag you choose, a mummy-style bag is recommended. The mummy bags fit snug to the body, leaving less air space. "Mummy bags are a little less comfortable," Braia said, "but necessary."

Keep feet warm, dry

Camping and hiking mean a lot of walking. For that reason, footwear and trekking poles are equally essential. "A key for me is to have insulated boots," said Kate-Lyn O'Keefe, program coordinator for the Adirondack Mountain Club. "You need something that's going to serve as insulation. You don't want a leather boot; your feet will freeze." Trekking poles, not your father's walking stick, can make a hike much more bearable. Trekking poles are collapsible and light, but incredibly useful on a long hike. Unlike a stick, trekking poles can adjust. If a person's walking uphill, the poles can shorten to compensate for the decreased distance to the ground. They can be lengthened on descent. While traversing a mountain, shorten the uphill pole and lengthen the pole on the downhill side. Medical research shows a 250-ton reduction in stress on the knees on an eight-mile hike with the use of trekking poles. Ironically, the gadgetry of modern technology often is of little use in the wilderness. A tent specifically designed for winter camping is much more important than a cellular phone or a global positioning system.

Limitations of gadgets

"The most important thing is if you're going to buy all these gadgets, then you need to know how to use them," O'Keefe said. "It's cool to know where you are with a GPS, but I'd rather use a map and compass because I know my battery's not going to run out. You should be able to tell where you are by the terrain and your map. "Cellphones can result in overconfidence or a false sense of security," she added. "Here in the high peaks, it's going to be difficult to get a signal. It's the same sometimes with radio contact. We have a back-country lodge, three and a half miles into the woods and if it's windy, we can't get through to it." In the winter, comfort's nice, but survival's the thing.

Online sources

Interested in trying winter camping? Here are Web sites with basic information and tips.

- Snow camping primer at www.sonic.net/~chard/snocamp.htm
- Western New York Living offers a winter camping manual from a former Boy Scout: www.wnyliving.com/outdoors/wintercamping_manual.htm
- List of recommended items to bring on a winter camping trip from the Williams College outing club: <http://wso.williams.edu/orgs/woc/gearlists/winter.html>

In addition to these sites, companies that sell camping equipment also offer extensive information online to help you choose between types of sleeping bags, for example.