

How to Hike During COVID

By The Editors

EMILY POLAR/TANDEMSTOCK.COM

Pick The Right Trip

Travel restrictions and closures are ruling out many destinations, but with a few simple considerations you can still find a trip that checks all the boxes.

KEEP IT LOCAL

Flights are (mostly) cheap, but with many modes of travel restricted, risky, or discouraged by the destination, this is the year to [explore areas closer to home](#).

TRY A B-SIDE

Crowded trails make social distancing difficult and increase transmission risk. Use the usual tactics for [finding solitude](#): Access under-the-radar trailheads, go midweek, hike early or hike late, skip known popular spots, and camp deeper than 3 miles from a trailhead.

BOOK YOUR SPOT

Some parks are still closed and many that are open are imposing quotas. So no winging it. Call park HQ in advance to book camping permits and entry times (where applicable) to secure your spot while minimizing human contact.

TAKE IT EASY

COVID presents new challenges to [the already-daunting task of search and rescue](#), which is often a joint effort from local law enforcement, fire departments, park personnel, and volunteers. Think of your wilderness trips this summer as a chance to recharge; it's not the time to push your comfort zone, which could unnecessarily put local first-responder agencies at risk.

MASK UP

The CDC recommends using cotton or other tightly woven materials as face coverings when 6-foot social distancing isn't possible (yes, even on trails). Many hikers, our staff included, are pressing neck gaiters and bandanas into this kind of service. Here's how to fortify them for maximum effectiveness.



1. Get a neck gaiter (pictured) or bandana. If using the latter, fold it in half first. Place a circular coffee filter (look for one made with TCF paper, which is compostable) in the middle of the fabric.



2. Fold the top third of the fabric down and the bottom third up. This technique, recommended by the CDC, maximizes the layers and lets you remove the mask without smearing it across your face.



3. Put two hair- or rubber bands around the fabric, equally distanced from the middle.



4. Fold the outer sections in toward the middle (these flaps sit against your face). Pull the hair bands around your ears for a snug fit. Discard the filter and wash your neck gaiter or bandana after each use. Pack a fresh filter for each day of your trip.

THE (NEW) RULES OF THE ROAD

Far-flung or international trips will have to wait. This summer, getting to the trails is all about the road trip.

1. READ UP ON REGS

Every locality and park has different operating rules in place with regard to quarantine, group sizes, and mask requirements. Know before you go.

2. READY YOUR RIDE

If your vehicle breaks down en route, you'll need a tow, which increases your risk of exposure.

3. STRATEGIZE YOUR STOPS

Prep [snacks and such](#) in advance so you can spend less time inside rest stops. If you have to go in, do it quickly and with as little contact as possible, says Travis Heggie, an associate professor at [Bowling Green State University](#) who specializes in travel and [wilderness medicine](#). Carry disinfectant wipes to wipe the handle of the gas pump clean before you use it. Wear masks and gloves indoors, always.

4. CHOOSE YOUR CREW

Heggie says it's safe to travel with someone outside your household, but recommends having a frank discussion with them before the trip to determine if there's any chance they've been exposed to COVID based on their work or travel history. Be clear about your risk tolerance.

5. OVERNIGHT SAFELY

Keep your plans loose. Identify multiple options for parking and camping before you hit the road. Avoid crowds by seeking out [dispersed camping spots](#) instead of campgrounds, and leave ample time to search for a back-up spot before nightfall, Heggie says.

6. RELY ON YOURSELF

"Prepare for facilities like restrooms, trash, water, and camp stores to be closed," says Tania Lown-Hecht, communications director for the [Outdoor Alliance](#). "Bring extra trash bags, water, and everything else you'll need to be self-sufficient."

PACK FOR SELF-SUFFICIENCY

To reduce disease transmission on surfaces, group gear is a no-go for now. Do this instead.

COOKING

- OUT** Liquid-fuel stove and a group-size pot
- IN** [Canister stove](#), or (easier) a no-cook menu

FILTERING

- OUT** Group pumps, gravity filters
- IN** Try a [Sawyer Mini](#) (\$22).

Individual chemical treatments are also effective but take more time and often leave a taste.

TENT

- OUT** Party tent
- IN** [Solo shelter](#) (most expensive), tarp plus [tarp skills](#) (cheaper), cowboy camp with social distancing (cheapest)

SNACKS

- OUT** Sharing a [GORP](#) bag
 - IN** Bars and personal snack menu.
- If GORP you must, pour from the bag. No digging.



Keep it Clean

Here's how to sanitize yourself and your stuff in camp.

Hands

According to the CDC, [the best way to keep your hands properly clean](#) is washing them for 20 seconds with soap and water to mechanically remove the virus. Observe LNT by using biodegradable soap and washing your hands 200 feet from water sources. (If you don't have soap, an [alcohol-based hand sanitizer](#) with either 60 percent ethanol or 70 percent isopropanol inactivates the virus and is the best second-choice option).

Mask

UV light does kill the virus, but sunlight isn't strong enough to sanitize your gear. If you want to clean your mask, which the CDC recommends doing after each use, Bill Anderson, professor of chemical engineering at [University of Waterloo](#), suggests using soap and water (observe LNT) and drying your mask fully before you reuse it. So, clean your mask at home after a dayhike, and on longer trips, treat your mask as you do your socks and pack two or three: Wear one, wash and dry one, save one.

Group Gear

It's common courtesy to wipe the poop shovel's handle before letting someone else use it. Disinfecting wipes are the best option to clean shared items. Use gloves if you think you'll be passing a lot of items back and forth. Better yet, pack as if you're on a solo and have your own supply of everything, including a trowel.

TEXT BY MADIE JARRARD (MASK UP AND KEEP IT CLEAN)

Will I catch COVID in the backcountry?

Short answer: It's very unlikely, especially if you identify and avoid the riskiest places and behaviors.

The Great Outdoors

Slightly being outside puts you in a low-risk environment. "The wind and the air disperse viral particles so quickly that it's hard to get a large inoculum from one person to another," says Roger Shapiro, professor at [Harvard Medical School](#) and [Harvard School of Public Health](#). "It's really much safer to be outdoors than indoors."

Around the Campfire

If you're keeping a 6-foot distance from your fellow hikers around the campfire, you're in pretty safe territory. But give people who look or say they feel sick a wider berth, or encourage them to leave communal areas. Don't pass around the whiskey.

On Trail

While it has become common courtesy to don your mask while passing someone on the street or trail, those are not the risky moments. According to Shapiro, airflow studies show that breath particles trail behind someone as they're hiking, which means walking behind someone is the danger zone. If you're stuck behind another hiker, allow a 25-foot gap.

Cooking

Camp kitchen danger lies in close proximity and shared utensils. Avoid the risk of transmission by packing your own gear and food instead of cooking group meals. Organize a basic schedule in camp so everyone has time and space for each chore without crowding together.

Tent

If you're going backpacking with someone outside of your established quarantine bubble, do not share a tent with that person. The walls of the tent block the outside elements that disperse coronavirus particles, creating an enclosed area with little air flow.

*LESS RISK -> MORE RISK

LEAVE NO TRACE

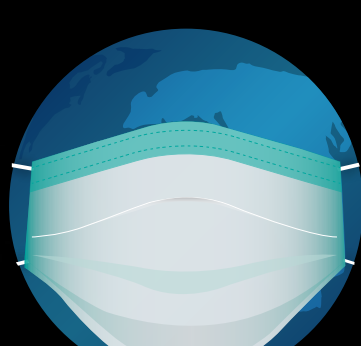
PRACTICE GOOD TRAIL MANNERS

Watch your step when social distancing in narrow trail corridors.



BE NICE

Everyone has more stress in their lives right now. **Be pleasant**, exercise patience at trail congestion points, and set a good example for new hikers who are hitting the trails for the first time, by making way for uphill hikers if you're heading down or making way for families with children. And remember: Any day on the trail is a good day.



MASK UP AND DISTANCE

If you are hiking with your home unit, feel free to drop your masks, otherwise front-country rules still apply. Don masks and keep at least 6 feet from other hikers (more, if following, as noted above). "Masks obscure smiles," notes Leave No Trace Field educator Erin Collier. "Wave and say hi, then agree on a plan to pass other parties."



PASS ON DURABLE SURFACES

Going off-trail to maintain distance from other hikers isn't always possible in narrow trail corridors—and **veering 6 feet off** of any trails can cause damage to vegetation. "Wait to pass a slower party from behind until you can do so on rock, gravel, or snow," says Collier. "If passing an oncoming party with no durable surface options, stop to let the oncoming party pass while turning your head."