

Hiking Clothes and Gear

Hiking boots

The right hiking boots determine whether you enjoy the hike, so invest the money and time for great fit and comfort.

-  **Weight:** Go as light as you can, but not at the expense of support and good tread.

-  **Ankle high vs. low-cut:** The trend is low-cut hiking shoes, rather than boots. However, we strongly endorse ankle-high boots for firm support on uneven terrain.

-  **Fit:** Try them on with the hiking socks/liners/orthotics you plan to wear.
 - When boots are unlaced, you should have room to squeeze a finger between your heel and the back of the boot, if you kick your toes toward the front.
 - When boots are laced, there should be little or no heel slippage.
 - Walk up and down stairs (or the store boot ramp) to test for slippage, flexibility, and to ensure toes don't bump into the end of the toe box.
 - Kick the toe box against an obstacle; your toes should feel no impact.
 - Boots conform to your feet, but don't buy boots that are tight or uncomfortable.
 - Most boots come in medium width; if you have wide feet, check out men's boots.

-  **Break-in:** The rule of thumb: Put 50 miles on boots before their first trip to break them in, adjust sock thickness, and toughen up/protect your foot's pressure points.

-  **Cost:** Expect to pay \$150+. If you find boots you love, check out SierraTradingPost.com for deals.

-  **Waterproof:** Good boots will be waterproof. Also note ... the higher up the tongue connects to the boot, the deeper the water/snow you can plow through without leaks.

-  **Shoelaces:** You'll want shoelaces long enough to double-knot - perhaps 54 inches.

Socks

Wear both liners and socks in hiking boots. Look for non-cotton liners that wick moisture from your feet. Top them off with a pair of wool or wool/synthetic hiking socks, such as Smart Wool. Even in summer, this combo keeps feet dry, prevents foot friction, and wards off blisters. The thicker the sock, the more it pads your foot. (Try them on with your boots to prevent too snug a fit. I pack slightly thinner socks in case my feet swell in heat.)

Hiking sticks

- 👟 Walking with sticks develops arm/shoulder muscles and works your heart. It also burns 20% more calories says Dallas-based Cooper Institute, a researcher focusing on exercise. Hiking sticks propel you forward, making uphill climbs much easier. Going downhill, they help with balance, footing, and knee impact.
- 👟 Using two hiking sticks transfers 250 tons of pressure from the back, knees, and legs to the arms during an 8-hour backpack, according to Leki, hiking stick manufacturer.

Wooden vs. fiberglass: Wooden sticks are beautiful, but consider lightweight, height-adjustable fiberglass poles. (Look for sticks that fit into suitcases when shortened.)

Handles: Look for comfy handles; foam handles also absorb sweat. Most have loops through which you slip your hands so the stick won't fall far if you drop it.

Rubber tips: Rubber bottoms (also available separately) on pole tips help grip in rocky areas and eliminate the "click, click" as your poles hit ground.

Shock absorbers: Spring-action impact-absorbers are nice, but not essential.

Cost: They range from \$15/stick at places like Target to \$90/stick.

Packs

Daypacks: These are like school backpacks, but are lightweight, quick-dry, expandable, and have hip/chest belts for support. (We're not talking large, overnight backpacks.) Ladies have enjoyed packs from Target, Wal-Mart, Costco. School backpacks also work if you're on a budget.

Lumbar pack: Worn around the waist, the pack is on the lower back. Great for heat.

Fanny pack: Great for short hikes, they also provide easy access to things without taking your pack off. Some hikers wear a fanny pack for cameras, etc., as well as daypacks.

Hydration systems: You might want to consider a daypack with a hydration system (also called a "bladder"). This plastic water bag has a tube from which you suck water, enabling you to drink hands-free. Some hikers prefer the bladder because it's easier than yanking water bottles from a pack, so you're likely to stay better hydrated. You can buy hydration systems to put in your current backpack. Look for at least a 2-liter bag.

- 👟 When buying a pack, fill it with what you'll be carrying to ensure everything fits and is handy. Then wear the pack around the store to check comfort. Walk, reach, and bend, to see if it chafes your arms in a sleeveless shirt.
- 👟 Look for lightweight material that will dry quickly and for padded, wicking material next to your skin.
- 👟 Choose a pack with easily accessible pockets for things you'll use often.

Clothing

-  **Layers:** Instead of one heavy item of clothing, wear two lighter layers. That way, you can add/remove layers as needed, and lighter clothing easily stashes in daypacks. For example, on cool days you could layer a short-sleeved top, long-sleeved one, and light fleece.
-  **Wicking material:** Invest in a couple pieces of quick-dry clothing that “wick” sweat from your body. On hot days, you won’t feel as sweaty; if you get wet on a cool day, you’ll feel warmer and dry quickly. (Get twice the wear out of short-sleeved tops by layering them under winter clothes.) In addition to shorts, shirts, and pants, quick-dry materials are great for bras, panties, and long underwear. Wicking clothing will be labeled accordingly; Capilene, Thermax, Coolmax, and polypropylene are examples of wicking fabrics. Outdoor stores sell it, as do many discount chains now.
-  **Wool:** Merino wool is now very popular as a first layer. Pricey, but good.
-  **Micro fleece:** A hiker’s dream - it’s ultra-light and stashes in small daypacks.
-  **Sleeve bands:** A couple shoestrings or sleeve bands (available at soccer stores) convert short-sleeved tops into sleeveless tops.
-  **Pants/shorts:** Pants that unzip into shorts are great; ideally, look for ankle zippers so you can remove pant legs without removing boots. You’ll love pockets in pants and shorts, especially if they zip or Velcro shut.
-  **Hats/gloves:** We’re in the mountains, so weather can vary. You might be glad for light waterproof gloves and a hat, which is the easiest, lightest way to control body temp. Some hikers like visors for sun protection.
-  **Leave at home:** Cotton, jeans, and sweat suits hold moisture/sweat and lose insulation value when wet. Uncomfortable/tight clothes (& creepy underwear) feel worse on the trail.

Rain gear

You’ll use rain gear at home, as well as on the trail, so avoid cheap, rubber stuff. (You can wear thin rain pants over fleece as snow pants.) Look for:

-  **Hoods.** Rain hats sometimes drizzle down your back.
-  **Very lightweight gear** so you don’t overheat. You can wear layers underneath if it’s cool. Lightweight gear is also easy to carry in a pack.
-  **Breathability.** Choose Gore-Tex, Sympatex, or other new synthetics so you don’t get wetter from sweat than from rain. Also look for underarm vents.
-  **Zippered ankles.** They let you slide pants on/off over hiking boots.
-  **Lightweight ponchos.** They’re a great replacement for rain jackets if it’s warm. They’re cheap, compact, waterproof, keep packs dry, and are cooler because air circulates underneath. (However, if it’s cold, rain can slide up your arms and winds can whip the rain underneath.)

How warmly should I dress? We find that it’s good to be a bit chilly when you start hiking; otherwise, you’ll stop within 10 minutes, take off your pack, and yank off a layer.