

EMERGENCY SHELTER DECISION & OVERNIGHT CHECKLIST

Choose the right shelter • Protect yourself • Conserve time and energy

Emergency shelter is about protection, not perfection. Use the simplest shelter that adequately protects you from the conditions you face. Your choice should reflect weather, terrain, available equipment, daylight, energy, and how long you may need to stay.

1. BEFORE THE TRIP

- Check expected weather, temperature, wind, precipitation, and daylight.
- Consider terrain, remoteness, route difficulty, and access to help.
- Match shelter equipment to the trip rather than carrying the same setup everywhere.
- Carry primary shelter for overnight trips plus an emergency backup when appropriate.
- Pack a way to insulate yourself from the ground.
- Carry appropriate clothing, light, navigation, water, food, and communication/signaling equipment.
- Know how to use your shelter before you need it.

2. WHAT DO YOU HAVE?

- **Tent:** Use it when available and appropriate.
- **Tarp:** Fast, versatile protection for rain, wind, shade, and equipment.
- **Emergency bivvy:** Rapid personal protection with minimal setup.
- **Emergency blanket:** Compact backup for insulation, wind protection, and signaling.
- **Natural materials:** A last-resort resource when carried shelter is unavailable or inadequate.
- **Snow:** A specialized winter shelter material requiring appropriate conditions and knowledge.

3. CHOOSE THE SHELTER FOR THE CONDITIONS

- **Rain:** prioritize overhead coverage, drainage, and keeping sleeping insulation dry.
- **Wind:** choose protected terrain and secure the shelter before conditions worsen.
- **Cold:** prioritize wind protection, dry insulation, and a barrier from the ground.
- **Cold + wet:** get protected early; moisture and wind can accelerate heat loss.
- **Heavy snow:** use an appropriate winter shelter and account for ventilation and structural hazards.
- **Hot conditions:** prioritize shade, airflow, hydration, and protection from direct sun.
- **Deteriorating weather + little daylight:** choose the fastest adequate shelter rather than an elaborate build.

4. CHOOSE A SAFE LOCATION

- Avoid dead trees, unstable branches, rockfall areas, unstable slopes, and obvious avalanche terrain.
- Avoid drainage channels, low areas prone to flooding, and locations immediately beside rising water.
- Look for stable ground with reasonable drainage.
- Use terrain to reduce exposure to wind and precipitation when possible.
- Keep the shelter location reasonably identifiable if rescue may be required.
- Do not sacrifice a safe location just to find better building materials.

5. BUILDING PRIORITIES

- Get protected from the immediate weather first.

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- Get off the cold or wet ground.
 - Add insulation before spending time improving appearance or comfort.
 - Keep clothing and sleeping gear dry.
 - Secure the shelter against expected wind and precipitation.
 - Maintain appropriate ventilation, especially in enclosed or snow shelters.
 - Stop building when the shelter is adequate and conserve energy.
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6. EMERGENCY OVERNIGHT CHECKLIST

- Shelter established before darkness when possible.
- Ground insulation in place.
- Dry layers available and protected.
- Sleeping bag, bivy, blanket, or other insulation protected from moisture.
- Water supply secured and treatment method available.
- Emergency food accessible.
- Light/headlamp ready with spare power when available.
- Navigation equipment secured.
- Communication device charged and protected.
- Whistle or signaling equipment accessible.
- Fire-starting equipment available where legal and appropriate.
- Pack and critical gear protected from rain, snow, and ground moisture.

7. IF YOU ARE LOST OR DELAYED

- Stop before continuing deeper into unfamiliar terrain.
- Determine your last known location and review navigation information.
- Attempt communication when appropriate.
- If continuing travel is unsafe, establish shelter and prepare to remain overnight.
- Conserve phone and other battery power.
- Make your location easier for rescuers to identify when practical.
- Do not leave a seriously injured person simply to search for help unless circumstances require it.

8. COLD, WET, OR WINDY CONDITIONS

- Get out of wind and precipitation.
- Remove or replace wet clothing when practical.
- Add dry insulating layers.
- Insulate the person from the ground.
- Monitor for worsening cold-related problems.
- Do not wait until you are severely cold before improving shelter and insulation.

9. SHELTER DECISION — QUICK REFERENCE

- **You have a tarp:** Use it rather than spending hours building a natural shelter.
- **You have an emergency bivy:** Deploy it early when immediate exposure is a concern.
- **You have only an emergency blanket:** Combine it with clothing, terrain, and available materials.
- **You have no shelter gear:** Choose a safe site and build the simplest effective natural shelter.
- **Someone is injured:** Protect the patient, provide appropriate first aid, and consider evacuation needs.
- **You are lost near dark:** Prioritize a safe location, shelter, communication, and conserving energy.

10. MORNING / NEXT-STEP CHECK

- Reassess weather and daylight.
- Check everyone for cold-related problems, injuries, dehydration, or other concerns.
- Reassess your location and route before moving.
- Confirm navigation and communication plans.
- Pack out or leave the site responsibly.
- If professional help has been activated, follow instructions from rescuers.

REMEMBER: This checklist is a preparedness aid, not a substitute for wilderness, first-aid, or winter-survival training. For a serious or potentially life-threatening emergency, activate professional emergency assistance as early as possible.

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