



Feminine Hygiene in the Woods

Menstrual Care and Feminine Hygiene in the Backwoods

Taking a car for a test drive before making a commitment to buy it is a common practice for good reason. Ultimately, it's a good way to ensure you feel comfortable driving the car.

The care of your body during a camping trip should be no different. Before heading out into the backwoods, you should test different hygiene methods and clothing options. Determining what works best for you prior to your trip will help minimize your risk for health issues and make your experience more enjoyable.

WHAT ARE THE RISKS?

Females have two chief worries related to hygiene in the backcountry:

1. **Vaginal Infection** (yeast infections, bacterial vaginosis) Due to an imbalance of bacteria in the vagina and results in discharge, itching, soreness, and discomfort. These can be prevented by keeping as clean and dry as possible and drinking plenty of water.
2. **Urinary Tract Infection** (UTI) Caused by germs entering the urinary tract system. Left untreated it can travel to the bladder and kidneys resulting in serious health risks. Preventing UTI's is critical as they can escalate quickly and **MUST** be treated with antibiotics. Keep a close watch for any of these symptoms and seek medical attention if present:
 - o A burning sensation during urination
 - o Fever and/or chills
 - o A dull ache/ pain in your upper back (kidneys)
 - o Cloudy, stinky urine

HYDRATE, HYDRATE, HYDRATE!

During moderate to strenuous activity, it's a good rule of thumb to drink about 1 liter (32 ounces) of water every two hours. Your fluid requirements may vary depending on the temperature, humidity, your body weight, and type of physical activity.

TIP: Remember to sip water throughout the day rather than guzzle down copious amounts of water! Continuous, smaller amounts of water will be better and more easily absorbed by the body. Guzzling large amounts of water all at once will only flush out important salts and electrolytes – Sip and sip frequently!

CHOOSING THE RIGHT MATERIALS

Choose comfortable fitting (not super tight) underwear that will promote a dry environment, as bacteria are better able to grow in wet, moist environments. Many options exist but paying attention to materials can be your key to comfort. Again, it is best to test out a few different options and weigh the pros and cons yourself before deciding what to take.

1. **Cotton underwear** is the most comfortable because of its breathability; however, it does not dry out easily once it has absorbed moisture which can lead to chafing and yeast infections.
2. **Performance underwear** Usually mostly made of polyester or merino wool and contain spandex and/or nylon for both stretch and durability.
 - o Pro: Dries super-fast!

- Con: Retains odors.
3. **Merino wool blend underwear**
- Pro: Easier to clean because the weave is looser. Less odor retentive.
 - Con: More expensive
4. For any trek (be it a few days or a few months) it is perfectly acceptable to bring **2-3 pair of underwear**. Be sure to rinse out and dry the pair that is not being worn. A simple rinse in the lake will do the trick. UV rays from the sun will kill off bacterial growth. If you would like to keep discrete; find a sunny rock away from the crew where you can lay out your garments. On a warm sunny day, they will be dry in no time.

CHOOSING THE RIGHT TYPE OF BRA

Choose a pull-over type sports bra, WITHOUT clasps. Over-time, metal or plastic pieces will dig into skin, causing irritation. This is especially true if you will be hiking with a backpack. Straps can rest on these areas causing extreme discomfort. Consider bringing along an extra bra, or a lightweight camisole to wear while one bra is drying.

URINATION IN THE WOODS

Urine is the way your body expels waste substances that it does not need. Pay close attention to the color and odor of your urine. This is important because:

- **Color** will indicate your level of hydration. Dark colored urine indicates that you are not well hydrated. You should immediately begin rehydrating. Pale yellow urine in large amounts is ideal.
- **Odor**-a strong odor can indicate whether you need to drink more water or could be harboring an infection. **Urine comes from a sterile environment within the body and should not have an offensive odor.**
- **Frequency** – If you are not keeping pace with others in your group, that could be a good sign you need to drink more.
- **Copious and Clear!** – **Use these indicators as a gauge for your health.** It may be tempting to drink less so you won't have to pee as much, but not only will you feel terrible, you could suffer serious health issues later.

Steps to Urinating in the Woods:

1. Let crew know which direction you are going.
2. Hike down trail and then off the trail. Seek an area that is out of visible range. Keep in mind other groups might be in the woods also.
3. If you are in a canoe, paddle to shore and hop out.
4. Walk 200 feet away from the shore or any water source, camp, or trail.
5. Take your time in finding privacy, out of eye shot but within shouting distance of the crew.
6. Crouch down low and be conscious of your shoes!
7. Be conscious of rocks or hard surfaces beneath you as urine can splash up!
8. Try to pay attention to the slope of the ground.
9. Either drip dry, use a pee rag, toilet paper, or moss/ leaves – If you use toilet paper, be sure to pack it out in a baggie.
10. Sanitize your hands when you are done. This will help general prevention of disease or infection with yourself and the rest of your crew.

11. Get back to your adventure!

PEE LIKE THE GUYS

There is the option now of standing up and peeing like the guys. Using one of these devices allows you to now have the freedom to stand up while you pee. Known Brand Choices: “Go Girl” / “SheWee” “P-Style”

Advantages: No squatting. No pulling down your drawers in less than ideal conditions (cold, windy, scratchy brush, rocky terrain with no coverage).

WIPING IN THE WOODS

There are a couple different options when wiping.

- **Pee Rag** – Use a cotton bandana, piece of cloth, or microfiber towel. (one brand to consider Kula Cloth) (consider labeling this or pointing it out to crew mates so that others don’t accidentally pick it up)
 - Rags can be rinsed off in water and hung out to dry on your pack
 - Keep in mind cotton absorbs liquids more effectively than microfiber.
 - *TIP: Make a pee rag using one-quarter of a square bandana. Tie a knot in one corner for a handle, and to help attach it to the outside of your pack via a clip or stretchy cord.*
- **Toilet Paper** – Either take some from the crew’s supply or you can keep your own in a baggie in a pocket.
 - Keep TP in a baggie to protect from water/ moisture
 - If you choose TP, keep a separate baggie to pack out used TP in.
 - You can bury TP ONLY if you have dug a 6-8-inch cat-hole. Bury everything and fill hole back up when you are finished.
- **Drip Dry Method** – No explanation necessary!
 - Some people pack extra panty-liners and change out as needed.
 - When you are done, be sure to put used pad in fem bag.
- **Natural Materials** – Using moss, rock, twigs, leaves, etc.
 - Can be abrasive and leave behind dirt/ plant material.

LEAVE NO TRACE

- Bring hygiene products with less packaging: to the extent possible avoid products that require an applicator or other packaging that will require packing out.
- Consider the use of thinner pads when possible. When possible, use thinner pads and smaller tampons to reduce the amount of waste and bulk that will have to be packed out of the backcountry.
- Consider using a reusable bandana instead of cleansing wipes. Bandanas can be used for daily hygiene needs. There will likely be some women who will be comfortable with this idea and others that will not. It is a personal choice that the individual must make. If a reusable cloth or bandana is used for hygiene needs, thoroughly clean it daily, away from water sources. (Use water from a bottle)
- Pack out all hygiene products and used toilet paper. If packing out used toilet paper is not an option, bury it along with human waste deeply in a 6-8-inch-deep cat-hole dug in a minimum of 200 feet (70 adult paces) from any water source, campsite, or trail.

- Diva Cups, Keepers, or other menstrual fluid receptacle. If possible, pack out the menstrual fluid to the nearest acceptable receptacle. Otherwise bury in a 6-8-inch-deep cat-hole, a minimum of 200 feet from any water source, campsite, or trail.
- Dispose of human waste properly. Human waste including urine and feces, should be disposed of at a provided facility such as a flush toilet, outhouse, or privy. If no facilities are available, dig a cat-hole 6-8 inches deep at least 200 feet from water sources, campsites, and trails.
- Urine: while the odor of urine can be a problem in heavily used areas, it is typically not a health concern. Urinate well away from camps and trails.
- Animals with salt deficient diets sometimes defoliate plants to consume the salt in urine. Urinate on rocks or bare ground rather than on the vegetation.
- Where water is plentiful, consider diluting the urine by rinsing the site.

KEEPING CLEAN

To keep and maintain a healthy pH balance the only thing necessary is a daily rinse with clean water.

- Rinse privates with clean water, and dry – soap occasionally, is completely fine but it doesn't need to be a daily occurrence.
- If no clean water; boil and cool water
- Baby wipes or Feminine Wipes – Pack used cloth out
 - Take a cloth and clean water or cleansing cloth with you
 - Find a private area and thoroughly wash away dirt and sweat.
 - Dry your skin and change into dry, clean underwear

PERIOD IN THE WOODS

Whether you're expecting your period or not, always bring menstrual products on the trail. Altitude changes and exertion may bring your period early or make your flow heavier than usual.

- Consider tampons, as pads can chafe during heavy activity, but wear whatever makes you comfortable. Also be mindful that pads might not mix well with aquatic activities because they absorb and expand when they get wet such as swimming or falling out of a canoe. Both used and unused menstrual products are smell-able, although if you are worried about having to change in the night you can stick a tampon or pad inside your sock, inside your boot at night.
- Slip used products in with the rest of your garbage. Carry an opaque bag to put menstrual products in and carry a few extra Ziploc[®] bags to keep used products separate from the clean ones and dry from the rain.
- Another option is to use Diva Cups, without the access to bathrooms, it can be wiped out with toilet paper and rinsed out over a cat-hole. To dispose of its contents, either place in a sealed plastic bag and hang it in the bear bag or dig a cat-hole. Place in an opaque, plastic container to pack in backpack safely. Softcups, similar to DivaCups, are disposable.
- Dig a 6-8-inch hole and bury menstrual fluids if you are unable to pack it out (regardless of which type of trek you are on).
 - Be sure to frequently clean your cup by rinsing and thoroughly soaking in hot, boiled water.
 - Always rinse and sanitize your hands BEFORE and AFTER inserting or removing the cup. This should be done regardless if you are in the woods or at home.
 - If you have the option; choose soap and water. In a pinch, sanitizer will work well too.

- *TIP: Do NOT purchase a menstrual cup and expect to learn how to use it out on trek! There is a learning curve to using menstrual cups, learn at home and become one-hundred percent comfortable with them BEFORE you decide to commit to it as your method on trail.*
- Always pack extra pads, panty-liners, or tampons. Just in case. Be prepared!
- Extra pads and tampons can be useful as fire-starters or as first aid supplies.

WILL BEARS COME IF I HAVE MY PERIOD?

Women sometimes wonder about the odor of menstrual blood attracting bears or other predators. According to the National Park Service (reference subject 6) this is NOT the case at all. In fact, bear prefer food to used feminine hygiene products.

- To avoid bear and other critters – properly hang a bear bag
- Follow Leave No Trace principles.
- “Rogers et al. (1991) recorded the responses of 26 free-ranging black bears (*Ursus americanus*) to used tampons from 26 women and the responses of 20 free ranging black bears to four menstruating women at different days of their flow. Menstrual odors were essentially ignored by black bears of all sex and age classes. In an extensive review of black bear attacks across North America, no instances of black bears attacking or being attracted to menstruating women was found (Cramond 1981, Herrero 1985, Rogers et al. 1991)”

Now, you can safely put your mind at ease! There is also lots of other scientific backed data disproving this myth. Myth busted!

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