

HOW TO PACK A BACKPACK (HOW TO MAKE IT ALL FIT!)

When packing a backpack, weight distribution is the name of the game. The bag itself can be broken out into different zones that help determine where to pack gear. Essentially, you want the heaviest items close to your mid-back for a stable center of gravity, and any items you need while you're actively hiking to be easily accessible.

A properly balanced bag can actually make you safer while hiking. If you lose your balance, a poorly backed bag can pull you down, whereas a well-packed one can help maintain your center of gravity.



As you can see in the above diagram, there are four internal weight zones, listed in order of how they are packed:

1. Bottom – Midweight items.
2. Middle back – Heaviest items
3. Front – Lightest items.
4. Top – Lighter items that you may need access to quickly.

Pro Tip: Make sure all your pack's compression straps are as loose as possible before you start packing.

INTERNAL PACKING ZONES

ZONE 1: THE BOTTOM

The bottom of your pack is the place to stuff your bulky midweight items. Start with your sleeping bag, which essentially forms a base for the rest of your gear to sit on inside the pack. Most people pack their sleeping bags in waterproof stuff sacks, but some choose to simply stuff a loose sleeping bag into the bottom of the pack to fill the space. Depending on the size of your sleeping pad, you can stuff that next to your sleeping bag. Use your camp clothes and pillow (if you carry one) to fill in any open space.

Some packs have a dedicated sleeping bag compartment at the bottom, with zipper access and a detachable sling to hold gear above the sleeping bag. If you need extra space in your pack, don't use the sling.

ZONE 2: THE MIDDLE BACK

The middle back of your pack, the area closest to the center of your back, is where all your heaviest gear should sit. This will be your pack's center of gravity, which helps keep it stable against your body while you walk versus swinging around and throwing you off balance. Gear to place here includes the tent body (and poles if they fit), cookware, a stove, fuel, and food you don't need until camp.

Make sure you're using all available space, which includes the inside of your cookware. Many pots can hold a fuel canister and even a small stove.

The middle back is also where your pack is designed to hold a hydration reservoir because water is one of the heaviest essentials you carry (one-liter weighs 2.2 pounds, or 1,000 grams).

Pro Tip: Fill your reservoir and place it in your pack before any of your other gear; it will be nearly impossible to do once your pack is full. Most packs have a small opening on one or both sides of the shoulder straps for the hose to exit and hook onto your preferred shoulder strap.

ZONE 3: THE FRONT

Because it's the area the furthest away from your body, the front of the pack is where your lightest gear should live. Lightweight clothes, a camp towel and small toiletries can all fill out extra space around the heavy items against your back. You can also use clothes to provide insulation around hard items or gear that might shift around.

ZONE 4: THE TOP

The top of your pack includes both the inside top of the main pack and the lid, also known as the pack's brain. Everything in this zone should be lighter weight to keep your pack from being top-heavy. These should also be items that you need easy access to, like first aid, a water filter (if it's larger, otherwise keep it in an outside pocket), snacks, a compass, sunscreen, a rain jacket, etc., so that you don't have to unpack your whole bag every time you need something.

Pro Tip: If you have a bulky, lightweight item like a foam sleeping pad that doesn't easily fit inside your pack, you can use the space between the lid and the pack body to sandwich it in place. Simply loosen the straps that connect the lid to the pack, slide the pad between the two and tighten the straps until it is secure. If you have an ultralight tent this is a good place for it, but don't try it with tents that weigh more than 24 ounces or so, to maintain a proper center of gravity.

ADDITIONAL PACKING AREAS

HIP BELT POCKETS

Most packs come with handy pockets on the hip belt. This is the perfect place to keep small items you need regular access to, like an energy bar, lip balm, a small pocketknife or your phone or camera.

SIDE POCKETS

Depending on the pack, your bag may have two or four side pockets. They are generally used for water bottles and can be reached without taking off your pack, depending on the bag and how flexible you are (ask a friend for help!). They are also great for managing tent poles or fishing rods (use some of the bag's compression straps to secure the top of the poles).

FRONT POUCH

Nearly all backpacks have a stretchy front pouch, often called a kangaroo pocket, which expands to hold lightweight essentials you need to be able to grab quickly. These include a rain cover, bathroom kit (small trowel, toilet paper, hand sanitizer and pack-out baggies), a water filter (if it's small, otherwise store it in the top of your pack), bandana, and even a rain jacket if there's still room. Some are stretchy enough to store crunchable snacks like a bag of chips without causing too much damage.

LOOPS AND CINCH CORDS

Some packs come with loops and elastic cinches to help manage extra gear. Some are specifically designed to hold things like trekking poles when you don't want to use them; others are there for you to get creative. Try not to have too much extra stuff dangling off your pack though—hanging items can catch on tree branches and just generally feel (and sound) annoying.

Pro Tip: Hook a few safety pins to some of your pack loops—they are perfect for hanging drying socks while you hike.