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Planning a Menu

What's for dinner?

As an outbound backpacker, your answer to that important question was made days, maybe weeks in advance. When you finally make camp after a full day of vigorous exercise, you're going to want to be happy with the decision you made. You want food that will nourish you, strengthen you, revitalize you and taste really good.



How Much Food Is Enough?

The National Outdoor Leadership School estimates that backcountry travelers burn between 2,500 and 4,500 calories per day, depending on their individual physiology and their activity. That translates into roughly 1.5 to 2.5 lbs. of food per day.

In a diet-conscious society, that may sound like a huge caloric intake. But food is the fuel your body burns as it powers up and down wilderness terrain. Finicky eaters typically morph into indiscriminate chow hounds after a few high-output days on the trail.

Anticipate that you will feel hungry often and that much of your quiet time on the trail will be spent thinking about food. It's true! Plan ahead for this stomach-gnawing reality.

If you're facing a borderline decision about how much or little to carry, take a little more. Feelings of unsatisfied hunger can distract you from the other sensory joys of a great hike. One of the [10 Essentials](#) for an overnight trip, in fact, is a supply of extra food. One day's worth of food is a smart emergency backup.

On the other hand, don't overdo it. A common beginner's blunder is to bring too much food on a trip, forcing you to lug unwanted bulk and weight in your pack. Experience will teach you what amount of food works for you. Consider a few basic guidelines:

Factors to Consider

- **Taste**—Eat what you like. Don't try and convert your taste buds to new types of food deep in the backcountry.
- **Calories**—Don't inaugurate a diet program during a multi-night hike. You'll need ample calories (and water!) to fight off fatigue and headaches.

Start Shopping



Breakfast



Entire Trip



Snacks



Side Dishes



Beverages



Beverages

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- Water Bottles
- Water Repellency

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- Backpacking Kitchen Supplies
- Day Hiking
- Overnight Backpacking
- Repair Kit Supplies
- Snow Camping

How To Choose

- Backpacking Clothing
- Backpacking Socks
- Backpacking Stoves
- Backpacks
- Binoculars
- Bivy Sack
- Camp Supplies
- Car Racks
- Child Carriers
- Compasses
- Cookware
- Daypacks
- First-Aid Kits
- Flashlights/Headlamps
- Fuel Bottles
- GPS Receivers
- Hiking Boots
- Hydration Systems
- Knives
- Maps
- Rainwear
- Sleeping Bags
- Sleeping Pads
- Sunglasses
- Sunscreen
- Tents
- Two-Way Radios
- Water Bottles
- Water Filters/Purifiers

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Quick Tips

- Before You Leave Home

- **Nutrition**—It's fine to tear into a candy bar during a trip, but for the long haul you want to rely on complex carbohydrates and proteins. Intelligent quick-eats such as nuts and dry fruits provide a stable flow of energy to your muscles.
- **Weight and Bulk**—Stick to lightweight and low-bulk foods as much as possible, especially on long journeys.
- **Ease of Preparation**—Unless you are an experienced gourmet, keep things simple. It's smart to be well-supplied with no-cook food items in case your stove malfunctions.
- **Cost**—Convenience has its price. Freeze-dried meals and energy foods can be expensive, but at the end of a long day when your weary body only has enough energy to boil water, such luxuries seem justifiable.

Options

- Refrigeration is one of those civilized luxuries you leave behind at the trailhead. Thus **fresh foods** are good for 1 day inside your pack, maybe 2. Carrots can sometimes last longer.
- **Canned foods** sometimes have a place in your pack if the trip is short and your hunger for grocery store food is high. Tins of tuna or other canned meat products can be a nice toss-in item for a pot of rice, for instance. But skip foods packaged in traditional 15-ounce (or larger) cans. The weight and bulk just aren't worth it. Don't even think about toting glass bottles.
- **Dry foods** (pasta, noodles, instant rice, soup mixes, drink mixes) are light, take up minimal volume inside a pack and offer you some decent taste alternatives.
- **Freeze-dried/dehydrated** foods have improved considerably in taste, texture and appearance in recent years. They cost about the same as a meal at a modestly priced restaurant, but they won't taste quite that fresh and savory. Still, put into perspective, they deliver above-average taste sensations in far-flung places.
- **Spices** can be crucial to boosting the appeal of backcountry food. Consider bringing your own spice kit, which could include pepper, garlic powder or salt, basil, cayenne pepper, lemon pepper, cumin, crushed red pepper, cinnamon or whatever else is essential to your home kitchen.
- Flavored **beverages** can taste mighty refreshing after a few days of nothing but water. Powdered drink mixes are a nice mid-trip treat. Take note that the caffeine in coffee and tea is a diuretic, which counteracts your efforts to keep yourself hydrated.
- For winter camping, bring extra food to help keep your internal fires stoked and rebuff any chance of hypothermia. Carry your ready-to-eat items close to your body during the day so they are not frozen solid when you want to eat them.



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- Clean Drinking Water
- Packing and Organizing
- Your Food
 - Staying on Course
 - Trailhead Security
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Thinking Ahead

Breakfast

Backpacking breakfasts can range from something fast and basic (an energy bar) to a lavish spread involving pancakes, eggs, meats and coffee. A hot meal can give you an extra boost, true, but a quick snack means no cleanup and a quicker start to the day.

Ideas: Instant hot cereals, dehydrated eggs, pancake mix, breakfast bars, granola, dry cereal, instant tea, coffee, powdered milk, juice, fresh fruit, dried fruits.

Lunch

Rather than take a prolonged break for a midday meal (involving unpacking, preparation, cleanup and repacking), a smarter strategy is to eat a series of modest energy-boosting snacks throughout the day. Such gradual calorie consumption is known as "grazing."

Ideas: Dried fruit, fig bars, bagels (which you can lug along on a shorter trip), energy bars, jerky and nuts.

Dinner

The evening meal is your reward for a full day of exhilarating exertion. If you possess elevated culinary skills that translate well into a backcountry setting, you're set for a powerful sensory treat—great food amid great scenery. If you don't mind the expense of packaged, freeze-dried or dehydrated food, the simplicity of a tasty, just-add-boiling-water meal is a relaxing treat.

Ideas: Packaged meals, pasta, instant rice, ramen noodles, instant soups and sauces, instant stuffing, instant potatoes and tuna. Consider bringing along some favorite spices (onion and garlic powder, basil, oregano).

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