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How to clean and care for your sleeping bag

By Cliff Jacobson

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Does your sleeping bag smell like a dirty sock? Get rid of the stink and dirt with a good washing.

However, frequent (and unnecessary) washings — whether by hand or in a washing machine — could cause your sleeping bag to lose loft and warmth. The baffles take a beating, too.

Get the most out of your sleeping bag by carefully caring for, cleaning and storing it. Here's how.

Everyday care

Extend the life of your sleeping bag and the time between washings by following this advice:

- Sleep in clean clothes when you're camping. Your bag will absorb the dirt and sweat from the clothes you wore all day. Wearing a stocking cap (if it's not too hot) will keep dirty hair from soiling the bag.
- A light cotton or polyester sleeping bag liner will keep your bag cleaner and add about 10 degrees of warmth. You can make a liner from a cotton sheet.
- Air out your bag in the sun for a few minutes each day of your trip.
- Don't leave your bag in its confining stuff sack for long periods. Constant compression will damage the fill. Unstuff and fluff your bag as soon as you reach camp.
- Spot-clean dirt with a toothbrush and soap paste.
- If it's not too cold, sleep directly on your foam pad and use your sleeping bag as a blanket.
- After your trip, air out your bag for an hour or so in sunlight. Be sure it's completely dry when you put it away. Store it in a large cotton or mesh bag, or hang it (well supported) from a peg. Some bags have a hanging loop.

Washing instructions

Wash your bag only when necessary. First, repair any tears. A sewn patch is best. Nylon ripstop tape or the sticky wings of a Band-Aid also make a good in-the-field fix.

Next, choose a detergent for cleaning; specialty soaps designed for cleaning down or synthetic sleeping bags are highly recommended. But any mild soap — like Ivory Snow or Woolite — works fine, if you rinse completely. Do not use harsh laundry detergents. You'll also want to gather some old cotton bath towels and a few tennis balls. (You'll see why later.)

If you're hand-washing your sleeping bag, use your bathtub. If you opt for a washing machine, choose a large-capacity, front-loading machine. A top-loading washing machine is not recommended because the agitating motion can tear the sleeping bag's baffles.

Washing by hand: This is best done on a hot, sunny day. Fill a bathtub with warm water, add soap and mix thoroughly.

Zip up the bag, turn it inside out and set it into the suds. Work the soapy water into the bag. Allow the bag to soak for an hour or two, frequently turning and working in the suds.

Drain the soapy water and refill the tub with clean water. Rinse the sleeping bag and repeat this rinsing at least twice to get all the soap out.

Drain the tub and slowly roll the bag into a cylinder, pressing out water as you go. Do not twist or wring the bag!

Transfer the bag outside to a chaise lounge or netted hammock in the sun. Turn the bag frequently and break up any clumps of fill. It might take days to dry the bag this way. To speed things up, you can spin-dry the sleeping bag in a front-loading washing machine and then machine-dry it on the lowest temperature.

Machine washing: Wash the sleeping bag using a front-loading washing machine with warm water set on a gentle cycle. Use mild soap. Rinse and spin twice.

Place the bag in a dryer set at the lowest temperature. Toss in some heavy cotton towels to absorb water and some tennis balls to help break up clumps.

Caution: Many dryers put out too much heat, even on their lowest setting. Open the door and let out some heat periodically. If the dryer stops, check on the bag immediately; don't let the bag rest against the hot drum.

Be sure the bag is completely dry before you store it.

Dry cleaning: This is not recommended. The cleaning fluids will strip the oils from down and could even melt synthetic fill. In the end, your bag will be clean but it might not be safe or warm.

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