Why Gear for Women?

- Women's centers of gravity are lower
- Women have higher arches and narrower heels
- Women have lower basal metabolic rates
- Women have beautifully packaged reproductive equipment with no external parts
- Women squat to pee
- Women hoard heat in their midsections and have colder extremities
- Women's lower legs are shorter, with more prominent calf muscles
- Women have narrower shoulders
- Women have wider, curvier hips
- Women have breasts
- Women's eye sockets are closer together
- Women have smaller hands
- Women have longer necks
- Women have shorter arms

You can probably think of more. (Yes, we know, women have larger brains!)

The good news is that there is now a lot of good gear specifically designed for women–a tremendous change from a few years ago, when most of us just adjusted to things that didn't fit or function quite right. There's also more that's needed. Ideas for products for women? E-mail us, and we will pass them on.

There are also some things that aren't specifically designed for women but are of interest to women because they generally work well for us. For example, we like certain ice tools because they are light and easy to grasp with small hands, certain gloves because they provide both good insulation and good dexterity for small hands, and certain packs and sleeping bags because they come in small sizes. We rely not only on our own experience but also on your feedback, and on your bulletin board postings in making these judgements, so please let us know what works for you.

Sleeping Bags

Several manufacturers make excellent sleeping bags for women. These generally have narrower shoulders, wider hips and more insulation in the foot section. We like these bags because they keep us warmer without causing us to carry more weight. We also like bags that come in "short", 5'6" or 5'7" lengths, which work well for many women.

If you are new to choosing a bag, decide first how warm a bag you need. Be aware that manufacturer's temperature ratings are a rough guide only. There are currently no generally accepted standards among manufacturers for rating the comfort ranges of sleeping bags, and ratings differ among manufacturers. Be aware of whether you are a "cold sleeper", that is, one who finds herself cold even when sleeping in conditions that are within the temperature rating of the bag, or a "warm sleeper", where the opposite is true.

Many women are cold sleepers. Once you know this, you can get a warmer rated bag and avoid the misery of cold nights. Frankly, we think that many women have been miserable for years because their bags simply weren't warm enough for the way their bodies function. We have speculated that some manufacturers must rate bags using furry, 300-pound men. So don't be shy about buying a warm sleeping bag – it is terrible being cold!

Once you have decided how warm a bag you need, think about whether you prefer down or synthetic insulation. Choose synthetic if you will often be out in wet conditions, especially if you may find yourself without a tent, or are not willing to be meticulous about keeping the contents of your pack dry. Down loses its insulating properties when it is wet, so it's a poor choice for consistent use in soggy conditions. Synthetic insulation is also

generally cheaper for the warmth rating so can be a better value if you are on a budget. However, it's also generally heavier and bulkier for the warmth rating.

Down offers the best warmth to weight ratio and generally compresses into a smaller stuff sack, which can be especially important if you are carrying full winter or alpine gear. Down bags, well cared for, will last many years. We prefer down for most conditions if you can afford it.

Important characteristics of down bags include the "fill power" of the down and the baffle system. Fill power is determined by allowing one ounce of down to fully loft in a test cylinder. Its volume is its "fill power." Thus, an ounce of down that fills 750 cubic inches has "750 fill power." Generally, the higher the fill power the better, because higher fill power provides more warmth for the weight. You may also want to look at the loft of the bag. The more loft, the more dead air space and the warmer it will be. Baffles are what keep the down in place. Sometimes, especially for bags that go from warm to mid-range temperatures, it's nice to move the down around to suit conditions. For cold weather, you don't want the down to shift and internal baffles should prevent it from doing so, without compromising the warmth of the bag with a sewn-through seam. Warmer bags should also have good collars, or top baffles, to close off the flow of cold air down the top of the bag, and at least one, and better two, baffles alongside the zipper to prevent inflow there.

Warmer down bags typically come with a Gore DryLoft or other water-resistant breathable outer fabric option. These fabrics provide some protection against moisture and condensation, the natural enemies of down bags. While we have had excellent performance from DryLoft and can highly recommend it for the best available protection in a down bag, some feel that in super-cold conditions, such as Denali, it will not breathe well enough to allow moisture from your body to escape through the down, thus causing ice to form inside the down and compromising the warmth of your bag. A vapor barrier liner can prevent this.

Packs

The three most important considerations when buying a backpack are the type of frame, the size and the fit. After that come the features. Generally it's a mistake to get too wound up over the features of a pack until the main issues are taken care of.

Internal or External Frame

The first issue is whether to buy an internal or external frame pack. External frame packs have been woefully out of favor for many years, but unfairly so, and are staging a little comeback. A well-built, good fitting external frame pack is an excellent choice if you are a backpacker who sticks mostly to well-maintained trails on reasonably flat terrain and usually gets to them in the car. External frame packs are durable, organize your gear well, are easy to tie massive amounts of gear onto, carry heavy loads, and are cooler to carry than internal frame packs. They also have lousy clearance, poor balance, limited flexibility and don't fly worth a damn. If an external frame pack suits your needs, buy it, and don't pay any attention to what the geeks say. (Just smile sweetly as you cruise past, with your wading shoes, tent fly, rain jacket and whatever else that was wet this morning drying nicely on your pack, while his stuff is molding in that trash bag in his internal frame pack.)

If you are a mountaineer or climber, hike in steep, difficult, brushy or closed in terrain or fly to your destinations, an internal frame pack is a better choice. There are scads of choices from the major manufacturers, all of them well-built and durable. Choose based on size, fit, and finally, features.

Size and Weight

Most reasonably fit women can carry about 45 lbs. comfortably, more or less depending on size and strength, of course. An old guideline for backpackers is to carry 1/4 to 1/3 your weight. Mountaineers typically hump ridiculous loads, but it's a strong woman who can carry 60 lbs. (not an atypical expedition load) comfortably, especially on steep terrain. So buy the lightest gear you can, and be very wary of buying a pack that will tempt you into Sherpadom. Apart from the weight of the gear, think about the weight of the pack. Packs can vary in

weight from under 4 to over 7 lbs. The weight of the pack starts to matter if you are carrying heavy loads on steep terrain.

A pack in the range of 3,000-4,000 cubic inches is a good overnighter or weekender if it's warm and you're not a gear and food hog. 4,000-5,000 is about right for trips up to a week. 5,000 to 6,000 cubic inches is for long trips and expeditions and will get real heavy real fast if you're not careful. Moreover, a pack with that much volume can simply overwhelm a woman with a slight build. Unless you are a guide, a masochist, or going to Denali or the Himalaya, don't even consider a pack larger than 6,000 cubic inches. You can't carry that much and have any fun. Bottom line is buy as small a pack as you can get away with, and if you are a mountaineer consider the weight of the pack in addition to the weight of your gear.

Fit

There is no mystique to fitting a pack. Start with your torso size, which will determine whether you want a small, medium or large pack. You can measure this by using a flexible tape measure run from an imaginary line around your hips at the level of the widest part of the hipbone (sort of the top of your butt) up to the first noticeable bump at your neck. Generally, 16 to 18 inches is small, 18 to 20 is medium, and 20 to 22 is large. But if you try on a bunch of packs, you'll get a sense for the size, which is all you need because that's just the starting point. Most major manufacturers make Small or even Extra Small packs that either come with, or can be equipped with, women's hip belts (curvier) and shoulder harnesses (narrower). These "women's" components work well for many women but not all. In fact, the pronounced curve of some women's hipbelts is too much for many women and a man's belt works better. So don't be afraid to try the man's hipbelt if the women's isn't working. Packs especially made for women tend to have a narrower bag with a lower center of gravity. These often wear very well for petite women.

Always fit the pack with weight in it, preferably the weight you will typically carry. Put on the hip belt so that it goes right over your hipbones, not above or below. Cinch the belt tight. Pull the straps that control the shoulder harness so that the pack is hugging your back and you can feel the pack on your shoulders, but the shoulder straps are not bearing the weight. Fasten the sternum strap an inch or two below your collarbone. Then pull in all the load tightening straps–typically running from the top of the pack to the shoulder straps and from the back of the pack to the hip belt.

Now check the fit. If the padding on the belt comes close to hitting in the front, the belt's too big. (You'll lose weight on long trips.) If it doesn't cover your hipbones, it's too small. If the shoulder straps don't feel right as they curve around your neck and armpit, they don't fit. Look carefully at the back of the pack. The shoulder straps should curve smoothly from where they are attached to the back of the pack all the way over your shoulders, without any gaps. The pack should feel right. If it doesn't, it isn't.

If you're in the right basic pack size, most of the high quality packs have a range of fine tuning adjustments, from adjusting the place that the hip belt velcros onto the pack to adjusting where the shoulder harness sits on the back of the pack. Hip belts and shoulder harnesses can also be purchased in different sizes. Sometimes it takes some trial and error. Patience wins. If you are mail ordering a pack, leave yourself time to return it or order different replacement components. This is not an "overnight delivery because I'm leaving tomorrow" item unless you love risk or know exactly what will fit.

Features

Most packs are loaded with gizmos and features, some of which actually make a difference. For example, there are top loaders, panel loaders, and combinations. Top loaders stuff from the top. These are great for just cramming things in and give you the most "stuffability". If you have a top loader, the thing you want is invariably on the bottom. You learn to pack smart if you have a top loading pack. Panel loaders load from the side or open up like a suitcase. These are convenient and make great travel packs, but are difficult to cram a lot of gear into because you can't get the zipper closed. Some packs combine top loading with a panel access zipper. This allows you to stuff your gear in from the top, but then access what's at the bottom using the panel zipper. The

zipper is one more thing to break, but they rarely do unless you mistreat them. More importantly, every zipper adds weight to the pack.

Some packs have big outer pockets for organizing gear; others are clean and spare on the outside. Generally a mountaineering pack will have fewer outside pockets, but will have gear loops and daisy chains for rock and ice pro. For camping, it's nice to have an outer mesh pocket on the side to stick the bottoms of your tent poles in, but for mountaineering you may not want to risk the poles on the outside of the pack since the consequences of losing them could be ugly. Ski mountaineers need shovel and ski pockets. Shovel pockets also work well for ropes and wet tent flies. Manufacturers tend to make a big deal about pockets for hydration systems or built-in systems. Most packs will carry a hydration system in the top pocket in any event.

One consideration that often gets overlooked is how the pack will travel. If you fly, and especially if you fly on foreign airlines, it's important to be able to protect your pack from evil baggage handling forces that it was never designed to withstand. Many women put the pack in a duffle bag to protect it, although a pack with the shoulder straps and hip belt off flies just fine on most major U.S. airlines if you tuck in all the straps and cords. If you put your pack in a duffle, sometimes it's easier to partially load the pack, put it in the duffle, and then finish loading inside and around the pack. Many hip belts velcro out easily. A few of the highly constructed, padded hip belts are harder to remove and require a screwdriver, which means that when you get to your destination you will have to reattach the belt. Practice this at home, it's trickier than it looks sometimes, especially in poor light.

How To Pee In The Woods
When it comes to taking a leak, guys have it easy: Just aim and fire. No cold buns. No splatter factor. But there are things women can do to improve the projected outcome. Here are three methods preferred by the women at Backpacker.

- Find a place where you can sit with your feet propped up: two rocks close together; a rock and a log, etc. This keeps you relaxed and your boots dry.
- Find a crack between two rocks or logs where you can stand and pee comfortably.
- Find a soft patch of earth and dig a shallow hole (to expose absorbent dirt) with your trowel. Squat with your arms extended out in front to counter-balance yourself or hang on to a tree or rock to aid in relaxation. Replace the dirt and duff over the christened spot.

In general, the best place to pee is in soft sand or snow because it sinks right down. The peeing process can also be made easier by wearing a skirt or pants with a "split pee" zippered crotch. But consider the squatting position an excellent vantage point from which to monitor your hydration level. Take a good look at what's coming out-clear to pale yellow urine indicates that you're well hydrated.

Bears And Menstruation
On Glacier National Park's infamous "night of the grizzly" in August 1967, two women died in separate bear attacks. One woman was menstruating at the time. What ensued, to the detriment of bears and women, was the rapid spread of a misconception that associated bear attacks with menstruation. "It's a myth," says Steven P. French, M.D., research director of the Yellowstone Grizzly Foundation. "No scientific evidence shows bears (grizzly or black) to be attracted to menstrual odor."

Go hiking, then, but double bag (in plastic) all soiled tampons and pads to minimize odors that may make bears and other animals curious. Hang the bags with your other trash, well away from your tent. If you want to minimize smells on yourself, wear unscented tampons instead of sanitary napkins; menstrual fluid is odorless inside the body. (See "Rub A Dub Dub" on page 2 for other hygiene tips.)

Preventing The Big Itch
Going without a shower for days on end has more than just aesthetic implications. It could nurture *Candida* and result in a yeast infection, one of the most common afflictions to strike women on extended wilderness trips. The possible causes of a yeast infection, in addition to poor hygiene in the nether regions, include use of antibiotics or birth control pills, and vaginal cuts or abrasions from tampons or intercourse. Yeast makes its

presence known with burning and/or itching in the vagina. The infection can also cause painful urination and redness, soreness, and swelling in the vaginal area.

To treat a yeast infection, use over-the-counter creams, tablets, and suppositories that contain at least one of these active ingredients: butoconazole, clotrimazole, miconazole, or triconazole. While prescription creams are generally no more effective than the over-the-counter variety, a prescription pill called Fluconazole (a single dose of 150 mg taken orally) is a worthy addition to a wilderness first-aid kit if you're prone to yeast infections. The best treatment, of course, is prevention. Wash the vaginal and perianal area daily. If you're infection-prone, wear cotton underpants; synthetics promote the growth of bacteria. Allow the crotch to air dry by wearing loose-fitting clothing.

A Happy Bladder
If you're susceptible to urinary tract infections, take special precautions to prevent one on wilderness trips. Drink plenty of water to flush your system. Relax when urinating so your bladder empties completely. Carry ciprofloxacin tablets or some other antibiotic for treating urinary tract infections. Or try herbal remedies.

Rub A Dub Dub
Many civilized traditions can be abandoned on wilderness trips, but cleaning your nether regions shouldn't be one of them. Good hygiene guards against yeast infections, minimizes odors, and prevents rashes.

- Wear tampons instead of sanitary pads, if possible.
- Use unscented sanitary supplies.
- Wash regularly with unscented baby wipes. If menstrual flow is heavy, bring a little squirt bottle to serve as a backcountry bidet.
- Bring changes of clean underwear and/or wash your undies frequently.

Freshette
Pee free. Just use this funnel gizmo and you can go standing up. It works, and we love them. Check out our Expert Advice page for a whole treatise on peeing, plus instructions on how to use the Freshette. I personally love this thing!
Retails at $20.

Prepared by Louise Dombrowski as part of a Woodbadge ticket (May 2005)

See also the article at http://lnt.org/sites/default/files/Considerations_for_Women_0.pdf on Leave No Trace and women's health. Don't forget that if you have fibroids you are likely to appear to menstruate when at altitude.

Below are some products that may be useful:

Sani-Fem Freshette Feminine Urinary Director

convenient for travel, camping and mountaineering.

- Lightweight, palm-sized device is reusable and comes with a carrying case
- Requires minimal undressing for discreet use
- Helps you avoid hazards like unsanitary restrooms, uneven terrain, poison oak and ivy and rough weather
- Costs: $22.95 at REI & Amazon; $18.99 at Campmor.com (April 2015)

Go Girl Female Urination Device (FUD)

- Flexible medical grade silicone
- Flange helps prevent splashing (but makes cleaning more difficult)
- Available in Lavender or Khaki
- Costs: $9.52 Amazon; $9.97 at Walmart; $9.99 at Target (April 2015)

The Diva Cup

- The DivaCup is a reusable silicone menstrual cup
- Convenient, reliable, environmentally responsible.
- Latex-free, plastic-free, chlorine and BPA-free,
- Can be safely worn for up to 12 hours at a time.
- Pink for young women (pre child birth)
  Blue for women who have had a child
- Do not use if you wear an IUD.
- Cost: $39.95 at REI or Walgreen's; $27.99 Amazon.com (April 2015)