



The Spirit of Alpinism

Women's Specific Concerns on Expeditions

On expeditions, it is not the grand gestures that dictate success, but a series of small, diligent habits. These form by consistently making choices to take care of yourself. There are several different strategies women can use to work with the physiology they have to make an expedition more comfortable.

Warmth

Women often feel colder than men in the mountains, especially in the hands and feet. There are several ways to deal with this difference. When your core is warm, the extremities will also be warmer. Your body will use less blood to warm the essential organs and therefore more will be available for your hands and feet. This might mean you wear a few more layers on your core than the guys. There is a plethora of lightweight layering pieces that will give you the warmth you need without stacking up a bunch of extra weight. Layering warmer on your torso will often allow you to wear thinner gloves as well. This is important, because you want to strike a balance between the dexterity required to hold an ice axe or clip and unclip carabiners and warmth. Make SURE you have a warm pair of gloves that you can comfortably handle carabiners with – a common cause of frostnip/bite is to take off gloves to mess with hardware!

Most days moving on expeditions you will wear a harness, so layer a bit heavier on the bottom. You can get away with more layers on your legs without sweating as much. You can remove and add layers on the top more easily, so layer for the coldest parts of the day on your legs and regulate your temperature with jackets and hats. Sweat saps a lot of energy and can cause you to chill down fast. Move in lighter layers – you should be a bit chilly when you start out after a break – but keep a warm layer available in the top of your pack. Be diligent about putting it on before you need it as soon as you stop. The same goes for removing it when you start moving again.

Be efficient at your breaks. As soon as you stop, do not sit down and stay down. Take a small rest, then use the bathroom, adjust your pack, put on sunscreen, drink water, eat a snack. Get these things out of the way so you can have a real rest before it's time to start moving again. The name of the game is diligent self-care!

Packs, Boots and Bags

Many women are smaller in size and do not have the same upper body strength as men. This does not mean they are unable to do certain things – they just need to figure out different ways to accomplish the same tasks without injury. When carrying a heavy pack, make sure you understand proper lifting techniques. Grab the pack by the straps, lift it onto your knee, and then

swing it onto your back. If you are using a new pack and you haven't carried a heavy load in it, put weight in it and go on a hike. Do all the adjustments you can to the waist belt, shoulder straps, etc. Many women's hipbones stick out, and therefore the weight of the pack will be riding on them. Make sure the waistbelt cradles and cushions your hips, or you could be in for some major discomfort and bruising over the course of an expedition. Adjust your straps so the majority of your load is on your hips and lower back and not your shoulders. There are several high-volume packs made for women on the market, but ultimately choose the one that feels the most comfortable with your body type.

The climbing industry is catching onto the fact that women are climbing high cold mountains, but many of the boot choices for these environments are still only offered in men's sizes. These are often wider in the heel than women's boots. Therefore proper bootfitting is essential for women. If you can get to snow, go hiking/snowshoeing in your expedition boots, preferably with your pack. You will have time to get new footbeds or adjust your sock system before the trip. Small adjustments like this can make the difference between comfort and misery over the course of an expedition.

Women's sleeping bags are a good idea if they are available in the temperature range you need, as they tend to be shaped for women's bodies and eliminate the extra air pockets that sap your body heat. They also oftentimes include more insulation in the footbed. The only downsides are that they are built specifically for shorter women (for women 5'6'' and smaller, so tall ladies will need to get a women's long or a men's bag) and they are also seldom available below 0-degree temperature ratings. Since women are less likely to be warm in a men's sleeping bag, if you have to go with a men's bag consider budgeting an extra 10 degrees (so if you need a bag that keeps you warm at 0, get a men's -10).

General Hygiene

Bring two sets of long underwear. On later season trips, you might consider wearing a lighter weight – as well as a lighter colored – set on the hot trek across the lower glacier and save a fresh warmer pair for up high. Try to wear one for as long as you can stand it, and then change into a fresh set after bathing with wet wipes. Wet wipes are great for cleaning yourself in the tent. Some climbers also bring waterless shampoo for hair. Take time to comb and/or braid long hair on expeditions to avoid itchy scalp and unwanted dreadlocks. On rest days when the sun is shining the tents can get tolerably warm, and you and your tentmate can take turns having privacy and you can give yourself a bath. This feels fantastic on an expedition!

Bring a separate bottle for pee. Collapsible Nalgene 1.5-2 L bottles work the best (bigger is better – think of having to get up and put your boots and puffy on to empty a pee bottle during a storm in the middle of the night when making your choice), and can be thrown away after the trip. Like the pee funnel, the pee bottle is another one to practice with at home before a trip. Some climbers draw a skull and crossbones or other obvious picture to indicate the container's intended contents. Holding pee at night is not a good idea. Your body is constantly using energy to keep you warm in cold temps and high elevations, and when you hold your pee you are using valuable energy to warm up a bunch of extra liquid in your body. Get comfortable with squatting right in the tent. You should be able to press the Nalgene against yourself and pee directly in without using a pee funnel. Some women tell their tentmates 'I'm closing the bathroom door' or something similar so they know not to look. Whatever you have to do to feel ok with your tentmate, but warmth and comfort trumps privacy when living in a tent for three weeks!

Bring 2-3 pairs of synthetic or wool underpants and a pair of cotton underwear or boxers to sleep in. The cotton underwear can help you feel cleaner while having your period. Some women like to bring panty liners to make underwear last longer during an expedition, while others find them sweaty and uncomfortable.

Pee Funnels

Pee funnels like the GoGirl or the Freshette provide a way for a woman to urinate while standing up. These are essentially funnels that you may press against yourself when you urinate.

There isn't a tremendous amount of privacy on our expeditions. On most days you will spend the majority of your time tied into a rope with your teammates. A pee funnel allows you a small modicum of privacy when you urinate.

Some female guides use these extensively whereas others prefer to simply have the team turn away while they squat to urinate. Ultimately the choice as to whether to use one of these devices is up to you.

If you choose to use a pee funnel it is recommended that you practice with it prior to the start of the expedition. In order to keep it from overflowing you will have to manage the rate at which you urinate. Most women practice with these devices in the shower prior to the start of a trip.

The two most popular models are the Freshette and the GoGirl:

<http://www.freshette.com/>

<http://www.go-girl.com/>

That Time Of The Month

And now for the big question for women on expeditions – how do I deal with that time of the month? Answer: it's not that bad – read on for one Denali guide's (quite specific) guide to dealing with it!

For my period, I use a Diva Cup (the Keeper is another brand). I also use it in the rest of life when not on expeditions. I can carry one with me wherever I camp/hike/climb without worrying about running out of tampons, and if I don't have any tissues I can clean it with water from my water bottle or with snow. I don't use snow on the glacier because we use camps other parties use and I don't want to leave bloody snow for people to see. I take some toilet tissues and pour the blood from the cup into these. I clean the Diva Cup with more tissues. I wrap the bloody tissues in some more tissues and put it in the CMC (Clean Mountain Can, used on Denali) or other latrine. If I feel shy about putting this in a communal latrine I put the tissues in either a brown paper bag or an opaque plastic bag (this is better; it doesn't soak through) that I then carry with me. I clean myself with wet wipes, and sanitize my hands. Wet wipes freeze, but you can keep a travel packet inside your parka for bathroom time. If you want to use tampons, the method is very similar. Take the tampon out, wrap it up with tissue, put it in the opaque bag. If the idea of using one bag for the whole trip is gross, you can bring a few bags set up this way.

And obviously, if you choose to use tampons, it's important to make sure that you have enough with you.

You should be prepared for menstruation even if your expedition isn't scheduled to take place during your cycle. Altitude often impacts the body in unexpected ways.

If you get menstrual cramps, bring whatever painkillers you usually use to help ease them. Everybody has strong days and days when they don't feel great on a long expedition, so if you feel off when you have your period don't stress about it. Just save some chocolate for those days!

Oral Contraception

Birth control may increase the risk of blood clots to dangerous levels at altitude. Here's what our advising physician, Dr. Alan Oram, had to say on this issue:

"There is higher risk of clotting associated with a woman on birth control pills. Stroke is one of many clotting problems that can occur. The other associated problem is venous thrombosis in the lower extremities that can lead to pulmonary embolisms. Unfortunately, this is one of the things that is more likely to occur. Generally, one should stop taking birth control pills at least a week prior to a trip. If at all possible, stop 2-3 weeks prior."

For additional information on this as well as information on pregnancy at altitude, please log onto:

http://www.theuiaa.org/upload_area/Medicine/Advice-and-Recommendations/No12-Women/UIAA_MedCom_Rec_No_12_Women_at_Altitude_2008_V1-2.pdf

You may also want to consult your physician before making any changes in your use of contraception.

Attitude

The single most important muscle that a climber of any gender will use is between the ears. A positive attitude, good self-care, and the willingness to face and work with the realities you are presented by your body and environment are the best predictors of success. You will have good days and bad days. You and your teammates will take turns being the stronger or weaker members of the expedition, but it is your bond as a group that will get you up and back.

We strive to provide all our climbers with the best information and recommendations for our programs around the world. If you have any questions regarding the information in this document or would like to speak with a female AAI guide, please feel free to contact the AAI office.

Happy climbing!

The AAI Team