



## Health Risks in the Wilderness

If you travel or hike in the wilderness, you should be aware of certain health risks.

### Preparing for the wilderness

Check your equipment before you leave home to ensure that you have everything you need. Pack for the wilderness according to the season, your destination and the length of your trip. Some gear to pack may include:

- Compass and map;
- Food and drink;
- Extra clothing in case of a sudden drop in temperature;
- Proper footwear;
- Rain gear;
- First aid kit;
- Flashlight;
- Pocket knife;
- Waterproof matches;
- Candles to provide heat and light;
- Lightweight emergency blanket;
- Plastic tarp and a roll of duct tape for repairing gear; and
- Insect repellent, sunscreen and other toiletries as needed.

Travel in groups of three or more whenever possible. This way, if someone is injured, then one person can stay while the other can get help.

In addition, know your physical abilities and limitations. Hike on trails within your ability. Be sure to carry a compass and a map of the area where you will travel.

### Drinking water

Parasites and certain bacteria can cause diarrhea, abdominal cramps, nausea and/or vomiting, weight loss, and fatigue lasting up to several weeks. These parasites and bacteria can

be carried by people, as well as by certain domestic and wild animals. They can get into any surface water, such as lakes, streams and rivers, and contaminate water used for human consumption.

Water quality and safety can also be affected by people practicing unhealthy, backcountry hygiene. If proper toilet facilities are not available, human wastes should be buried away from streams and other bodies of water.

When traveling in the wilderness or backcountry, you may use water for drinking or brushing your teeth as follows:

- You boil the water for at least 1 minute. At elevations over 2,000 meters (6,500 feet), boil water for at least 2 minutes to disinfect it. Water boils at a lower temperature at a higher elevation; or
- You chemically treat the water before use.

Please note: Bleach does not work well in killing *Giardia* (beaver fever) or *Cryptosporidium* parasites. For more information, see HealthLink BC File [#49b How to Disinfect Drinking Water](#).

### Wild animals

The experienced traveller or hiker avoids close contact with wild animals for safety reasons and avoids disrupting their normal activities. Animals are potentially dangerous if approached too closely, especially bears and female moose with calves. Be careful and keep your distance. Always remember that wild animals can carry a variety of diseases.

Travellers, hikers or visitors in parks, forests and other wilderness areas should not attempt to feed or touch any wild animals. Special care

should be taken to avoid contact with any animal that appears to be sick or dead. You should consult a doctor if you are bitten or scratched by a wild animal or bitten by a flea or tick.

Rabies is a very serious disease carried by a small percentage of bats in B.C. Do not touch any live or dead bat, and report any physical contact with a bat. Treatment must begin as soon as possible to prevent rabies which can be fatal. Wash thoroughly with water any animal bite or scratch wounds. Immediately report this to a doctor. A tetanus shot may also be necessary.

### **Fleas, ticks and other insects**

Fleas and ticks are tiny insects that can bite or burrow part way into your skin and draw blood out before dropping off. They can carry and spread a number of diseases.

If you find a tick attached to your skin, the best way to remove it is by grasping it with a pair of tweezers. Pull it gently, straight up and out. If its mouth parts are imbedded deeply, a doctor may have to remove the tick. Wash the bite wound thoroughly with disinfected water and soap. Do not touch the tick with your hands. You may wish to save the tick in a small plastic or glass container (with a water dampened cotton ball to keep it alive) in case your doctor needs to inspect it later if you develop a fever or the area around the bite becomes infected. See a doctor if any illness occurs a few weeks after a tick bite.

Other insect bites may also cause concerns. Some people may have severe allergic reactions to bee and wasp stings. These people should carry appropriate medication as prescribed by their doctor.

Mosquitoes may carry West Nile Virus or viruses that cause other diseases. To protect against insect bites, including ticks, use insect repellent containing DEET on all uncovered skin. To protect against mosquito bites, wear loose fitting, light-coloured, long-sleeved shirts and pants especially at dawn or dusk when mosquitoes are most active.

If you have any concerns about an insect bite, contact your doctor or call 8-1-1 to speak to a registered nurse.

**For more information on wilderness health and safety, see HealthLink BC Files:**

[#01 Tick Bites and Disease](#)

[#07 Rabies Prevention and Treatment](#)

[#10 Giardiasis \("Beaver Fever"\)](#)

[#26 Sun-smart Your Kids](#)

[#41a Health Advice for Travellers](#)

[#47 Blue-green Algae Blooms](#)

[#48 Cryptosporidiosis](#)

[#49b How to Disinfect Drinking Water](#)

[#52 Swimmer's Itch](#)

[#88 West Nile Virus](#)

[#96 Insect Repellents and DEET](#)

For more information on wilderness activities and recreation, visit the BC Parks Web site at [www.env.gov.bc.ca/bcparks](http://www.env.gov.bc.ca/bcparks).



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Click on [www.HealthLinkBC.ca](http://www.HealthLinkBC.ca) or call **8-1-1** for non-emergency health information and services in B.C.

For deaf and hearing-impaired assistance, call 7-1-1 in B.C.

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