



## Hiking Footwear

Choosing the right footwear may be the most important decision you make as a beginning backpacker. The shoes or boots you choose must be comfortable, durable and protective for many years to come.

1. Select the appropriate boots or shoes based on your planned activity. Mountaineering boots must be much heavier and more substantial than day-hiking boots.
2. Learn about the materials used in hiking footwear. Do you need heavy, waterproof materials or lighter-weight, breathable ones?
3. Consider how boot construction will affect your activity.

Get your feet measured properly and then try on the boots with the appropriate socks. Take a test walk on a flat surface and then an incline and check for any slippage or discomfort.

### What kind of trips do you have planned

Outdoor footwear can be divided into 3 basic categories. Begin your search for the right boots or shoes by focusing on the category that best matches your hiking or backpacking plans.

- **Lightweight hiking**—These boots (and trail shoes) are designed for day hiking and very short overnight trips only. They stress comfort, cushioning and breathability. As a result, they are less supportive and durable than the options below.
- **Midweight hiking/backpacking**—These boots are designed for on and off the trail hiking with light to moderate backpacking loads. They are more durable and supportive than lightweight hiking boots, but they are still intended primarily for short to moderate trips over easy to moderate terrain.

- **Extended backpacking/mountaineering**—These boots are designed for on and off the trail hiking with moderate to heavy backpacking loads. They are designed with multi-day trips in mind. Durable and supportive, they provide a high degree of ankle and foot protection. Some of these models are designed specifically for rough terrain with heavy backpacking loads. They offer the very best in durability, support and protection. Some are stiff enough to accept crampons for snow/ice travel.

## Choosing the Appropriate Materials

The materials used in a given boot or trail shoe will affect its weight, breath ability, durability and water resistance. Since boots made of different fabrics can be very similar in performance, however, personal preference is often the key when choosing between them.

- **Nylon mesh and split-grain leather** - Nylon and split-grain leather boots are lightweight and breathable, which makes them perfect for warm to moderate weather use and short to moderate backpacking trips. They tend to be softer on your feet, they take less time to break in, and they are almost always lighter than full-grain leather boots. They also cost less. Unfortunately, nylon/split-grain boots tend to be less water resistant than full-grain leather boots (although styles that feature waterproof liners can be just as watertight, if not more so).
- **Full-grain leather** - Full-grain leather is extremely water resistant, durable and supportive (more so than split-grain leather or nylon). It's used primarily in backpacking boots designed for extended trips, heavy loads and hard terrain. Not as lightweight or breathable as nylon/split grain combinations, but it typically lasts far longer. Full-grain leather usually requires a break-in period.
- **Waterproof barriers** - Lightweight, waterproof barriers (like Gore-Tex®) are built into many hiking boots to enhance their water resistance. These barriers are available in a variety of boot styles, from lightweight hikers to extended backpacking models. Waterproof performance depends upon the type of barrier used, the materials protecting it and how well the boots are taken care of. If cared for correctly, these waterproof barriers often last longer than the boots themselves.

Be aware when shopping for backpacking boots to differentiate between the following:

- **Waterproof leather** —This is leather that's been treated to be waterproof. Leaks may still occur, if the boot pieces are not put together well.

- **Waterproof (or watertight) construction** —This refers to construction techniques designed to keep leaks out (like seam-sealing, special stitches and precise designs). Water-tight construction is typically combined with waterproofed materials.
- **Waterproof liners** —These are the special waterproof barriers described above that are built right into the boot to protect you from whatever leaks make it through the boot materials. These liners typically do a great job of keeping you dry however, Gore-Tex and others waterproof liners don't last forever.

The waterproof ability of your hiking boots depends significantly on how well you treat them. Be sure to follow all care instructions that come with your boots so that they can perform well and last a long time.

## Construction Aspects

### Upper construction

The more seams a boot or shoe has, the higher the risk for leaks and blow outs. Leaking occurs when water seeps through the needle holes or spaces between the boot panels. Blow outs occur when general wear, repeated flexing or a snag causes a stitch to break and two panels to separate. In general, the fewer seams an upper has, the more water resistant and more durable it will be.

### The connection between the upper and the sole

Hiking boot soles are either stitched or cemented to the rest of the boot.

- **Stitching**—Durable, reliable, can be undone to replace the sole once it has worn down. Different techniques (Littleway, Norwegian) result in different strengths and stiffness.
- **Cementing**—Faster and less expensive than stitching, resulting in lower boot prices. It hasn't always been reliable, but most modern methods produce durable, long-lasting bonds (depending upon the process and specific glue used). Most cemented boots can now be resoled just like traditional stitch-down models.

## The Best Fit

Once you've narrowed down your options to a handful of boots or shoes, the best way to decide between them is to try them on and give them a test drive.

## **Boot Care and Concerns**

Keep your boots and trail shoes clean between uses by brushing off dirt and mud as both can ruin leather over time. Most fabric boots and shoes can be washed on the outside with mild soap and water. Avoid using detergent.

If your boots get drenched, stuff them loosely with newspaper and dry them in a warm place. Never rush the drying process by placing them near a fire, heater or other heat source.

Boots need to be conditioned from time to time, especially if they're made of leather. This is true whether you hike in dry, hot conditions or wet, moist areas.