

Sleeping Pads

Sleeping pads 1) keep you comfortable when you're sleeping on hard, uneven ground, and 2) provide an important layer of insulation between you and the ground.

How do they work?

Sleeping pads insulate the same way that sleeping bags and clothing layers do. They trap and hold a layer of dead air between your body and the cold ground. Your body gradually warms this layer of dead air and it becomes an insulating barrier.

Factors to Consider

When choosing a pad, factors to consider are:

- Insulation
- Comfort
- Weight/Bulkiness
- Durability
- Cost

Decide which of these factors are most important to you and consider your outdoor plans, including:

- **Weather** – in fair-weather, comfort will probably be more important than insulation. But in early spring or late fall trips make sure you get a pad that provides protection from cold and wet conditions. It is recommended that you use two pads in snow or frozen conditions.
- **Comfort level** - some people prefer to save money, space and weight by sticking with very basic pads. Other prefer to spend (and carry) a little more to stay as comfortable as possible in the wilderness.
- **Weight** - Thicker, more comfortable pads can be heavy, and difficult to carry on long backpacking trips. Weight will be less of an issue on short trips.
- **Space** - If you're backpacking with a full gear load, a light, compact sleeping pad will be far easier to pack.

Options

- **Air mattresses** - basic, inflatable air bladders
Positives - They're comfortable, adjustable and inexpensive.
Negatives - They tend to be heavy, bulky and they can be punctured/ripped easily. Air inside is free to circulate, so they tend to be poor insulators.
- **Open-cell foam pads** - sponge-like foam pads made up of tiny, open air cells
Positives - They're comfortable, lightweight and inexpensive. The tiny foam cells restrict air circulation, so they are also more effective insulators than air mattresses.
Negatives - Open-cell foam is absorbent, which can cause problems in wet conditions. It's also less insulating than closed-cell foam (it must be cut about four times as thick to get the same insulation). Open-cell foam tends to be bulky, difficult to compress (for packing) and not very durable.
- **Closed-cell foam pads** - pads made out of dense foam filled with tiny closed air cells
Positives - They're cheap, durable (won't pop when tromped on) and extremely insulative (almost no circulation of air in pad, so they can be cut thin yet still provide good insulation). Closed-cell foam is also non-absorbent.
Negatives - They're relatively stiff and firm, with far less cushioning than open-cell foam (so you'll need a thicker, heavier piece to be as comfortable).
- **Self-inflating pads** - open-cell foam pads wrapped in air-tight, waterproof nylon shells.
Positives - They're as comfortable as open-cell foam, but much more insulating (the nylon shell limits air circulation, while also protecting against water absorption). They're adjustable (built-in air valves let you control the amount of air inside and thus the firmness of the pad) and they're extremely compact when rolled up.
Negatives - They're more expensive than the options listed above. Can be punctured or ripped