

'Be Prepared' – that's the Scout motto, and it is also one that hikers or anyone heading out on adventures in the wild should be. You hear frequently of the horror stories and disasters happening on the trail and we never think it could ever happen to us.

Often we don't tend to have it at the forefront of our minds but when planning an adventure out in the wilderness we really should think about the 'what-ifs?' and what would you need to do if it does occur?

What if you twist or break a leg? Or if you get bitten by a snake? What if you get lost and become dehydrated? These are just some examples of what could go wrong.


Prepare for all scenarios when hiking, including freezing cold conditions. Image: Leigh Swansborough

How to prepare:

- Research – be knowledgeable about where you are going and what to expect.
- Train – be physically fit for what you expect your body to do.
- Carry a first aid kit – including a snake bite kit, emergency blanket, whistle and light.
- Learn basic first aid skills – there are many courses one can take to prepare.
- Learn basic survival skills – for example, how to find water, navigate using a map and compass.
- Know the States Emergency Services contact numbers – these are listed at end of this article, make sure you write them down.
- Carry a PLB – as this could be the difference between life and death.
- Have plenty of supplies like water and food – a little extra could save your life.
- Carry appropriate gear and clothes – maps, compass, thermals, compact water filter etc.
- Tell people where you're going, and your expected time of return.
- Be responsible for your own safety.
- Stay up to date with appropriate weather sources for the area you intend to travel in.
- Common sense – something so simple but often forgotten.


It's vital to have all the safety gear necessary for your trip.

What if you're faced with a natural disaster while you are out in the wilderness?

Do you know what to do? Natural disasters can happen at any given moment. You have no control over when or where these things can happen, but you can be prepared by knowing what procedures to take when one does.



What natural disasters should I be prepared for?

Bushfires are the most common here in Australia but there are all types of natural disasters that can happen and all have their own way to deal with them. Some that you can come across even in Australia are:

- Bushfires
- Severe thunder/lightning storms
- Flash floods
- Snowstorms/blizzards
- Rockslides or avalanches
- Cyclones
- Earthquakes

Knowing what to do when disaster strikes can give you the best chance of survival. So, plan before you adventure and then return with great memories, not bad ones.



Be prepared for anything that could happen on the trail.

Bushfires

Bushfires are always in the minds of hikers and are a real danger to be faced with. They can happen at any given time for a variety of reasons. Fires can start by lightning strikes, unattended campfires, and unfortunately, they can also be deliberately lit.

Always be alert for any signs of a bushfire and if possible, to stay updated on what's happening in the area you are hiking in.



Unfortunately, bushfires are a real risk for hikers.

Signs to watch for are:

- Total fire ban. Always check warnings before heading out.
- Smoke on the horizon - not just in front of you.
- The smell of smoke in the air.



In fire season, always check the warnings before a trip.

If you get caught in a fire:

- If possible, call emergency services on **000**. Also, carry a personal locator beacon (PLB) and use if needed.
- Stay calm. You are more likely to think clearly and protect yourself if you are calm.



- Head immediately to a clearing or seek shelter in streams, embankments, rocky outcrops etc. **Do not** try and hide within water tanks you are safer in flowing water.
- Head to low ground, not high ground. You cannot outrun a fire especially uphill as they move faster upwards as the heat rises.
- If you can, move to already burnt ground. Last resort would be to run through low burning flames to get to the burnt ground. Take a deep breath, cover your face, preferably with a wet cloth and run.
- Drink plenty of water and cover your mouth with a wet cloth.
- Remove all synthetic clothing and cover your body if possible with natural fibres like wool.
- Know how to treat burns before heading out on your journey and carry appropriate gear in your first aid kit.



If you are confronted by a bushfire, try to stay calm and levelheaded.

Thunderstorms/lightning

This can be scary for any hiker who is suddenly confronted with a severe thunderstorm, I know this first hand as it has happened many times to me on the trail. Hearing thunder is frightening enough, but it's lightning that's dangerous and should not be ignored.

Hiking through mountainous areas you are more likely to have the company of a storm. You cannot always predict the way the weather will behave in the mountains, and it can arrive very fast and disperse just as quickly.

If you are stuck in the wilderness and the skies open up, then you should take immediate action. When you find the clouds are building and a storm is imminent then it's best to head to the lower ground.

You may know if a storm is approaching if your hair stands on end, a sudden drop in temperature or even electric zaps between your fingers and the rocks.



Take action right away if you see clouds building. Image: Leigh Swansborough

How to tell if a storm is approaching

Hint: If you are wearing a watch with an altimeter reading on it this can help you gauge the barometric pressure and give you the heads up on an approaching storm.

If while you're standing still your watch is still climbing higher, the chances are it's because the barometric pressure is changing and a storm could be approaching.

When caught in a storm:

- If high on a summit and/or in an open area then try to descend down into a valley. Avoid any isolated trees and watercourses.
- Move away from any tall standing objects like trees, power lines, cliffs, large rocky



outcrops.

- If in a group, spread out to minimise the risk of an electrical current travelling through all of you.
- Toss any metal objects away from you and don't use your mobile phone.
- Cover up, keep warm and dry. Often when a storm hits the temperature can drop rapidly. When you add heavy rain even hail to that, you can run the risk of hypothermia.
- Get down low, either crouch, sit or curl up into a ball.
- Use an insulator to sit or lie on, for example, your sleeping pad or backpack just to separate you from the ground as the electrical current can travel through the ground and into your body.
- If in a heavily wooded area then choose smaller low lying trees or logs to hide beside. Don't hide behind rocks as you are more at risk of electrical currents running through them. Be conscious of high winds and falling trees and branches.



Storms are a real risk when you're on the trail. Image: Leigh Swansborough

Flash floods

Flooding can happen just like that - in a flash! Be aware of the area you are travelling, is it of high risk for flash flooding?

How do flash floods occur?

Reasons for flooding can vary depending on what part of the world you are in. It may be a relatively short but excessively heavy burst of rain where the ground is already soaked by water and it just can't absorb the water quickly. Riverbanks can easily break their banks if they can't handle the volume of water.

On coastlines you have the risk of tidal surges after a severe storm like a cyclone, these surges can rush inland on lower lying areas quite fast. Other low lying areas like wetlands can be a place that could flood quite easily after excessive rain, though the flooding can happen more slowly it still is a risk.

Did you know a flash flood can occur even if it wasn't raining in that area? That's right there may be blue skies above you but if the rainfall higher up is not absorbed into the land it will flow downstream and fast.

It is best for that reason that you do not camp in a dry river bank. They may look nice and flat and therefore, a great place to pitch the tent. But, they are also likely to have water rush through at any time. Choose a spot to camp at least 50 metres or more away from a riverbed or creek and on higher ground.



Set up camp away from riverbeds. Image by Mary O'Callaghan



If caught in a flash flood:

- Get to higher ground fast, don't enter a gorge, river or stream where water flow may tunnel.
- If you are in a gorge you then you need to climb if possible and quickly. You will not be able to outrun a flash flood. Before entering a gorge, check the weather forecast for that area first.
- Don't try to enter or cross any fast-moving water as this can be extremely dangerous.
- If carrying a pack through water – undo your straps in case you are knocked over, as your pack can drag you under potentially drowning you.
- Call for help via mobile phone or PLB.

Earthquakes

What do you do when an earthquake strikes whilst hiking? This is something I haven't really thought a lot about as it isn't something I have come across before. I started thinking about it when recently we had a 5.4 magnitude where I live. Although I wasn't on the trail at that precise moment, I was just 12 hours prior, so it got me wondering what to do.

I know, as we learnt in school, that if the ground starts to shake then you need to drop under your desk, stand in the door frame or lay in a bathtub and if outdoors head to the oval or an open area.

But what do you do if you are in the bush or forest with many tall trees around and no open area and a long way from civilisation?



If you feel the earth move when you're on the trail, move away from cliff edges.

If the earth moves:

- Try to move away from tall trees, cliff edges, large rocks anything that can possibly fall on you.
- If in your tent then get out as you could get tangled and trapped which could result in suffocation.
- If at a campground where there is a table, climb under it. Don't go into a shelter as these are usually unstable.
- If near a campfire then move away quickly so not to fall into the fire.
- Large earthquakes can cause landslides and cliff falls so move away from areas where it potentially could happen.
- Tsunamis can be a risk if near coastal areas so once the shaking stops try to head for higher ground.





If you get bitten by a poisonous snake, then follow the steps below. Image: Lari McDonald

If you get bitten by a snake:

Whenever you're hiking in an area that's a natural habitat for snakes, take the precautions to protect yourself such as wearing gaiters, appropriate footwear, carrying a snake bite kit, a PLB and exercise caution on the trail. You read more about what you need to know if you encounter a snake [here](#).

If you or someone you are hiking with gets bitten by a snake, here are the steps you should take according to [St John Ambulance Australia](#):

- Call triple zero (000) for an ambulance or set off your PLB
- Have the patient lie the down and keep still whilst reassuring them.
- Use your snake kit, mark the location of the bite on the skin with a marker pen.
- Apply an elasticised roller bandage over the bite site as soon as possible and then apply another upwards on the limb as far as you can. If you don't have any bandages then use any clothing possible making sure the pressure is very firm.
- You can immobilise the bandaged limb using splints from your hiking poles for example.
- It is important the patient is kept lying down and completely still.
- Take note and write down the time of the bite.
- Stay with the patient until medical aid arrives



Have the bite victim lie down and stay still.

What to do in the case of dehydration?

I really believe that prevention is better than cure. Mild dehydration can be rectified by simply consuming more fluids. Try adding some [electrolytes](#) to your water, this helps a lot especially as your levels will be low and need replenishing. If the weather is hot, wearing appropriate sun protection and taking regular breaks in the shade are also important things to consider. For more information on preventing dehydration, head [here](#).

By the time you realise that you are thirsty, you are already starting to get dehydrated. In the case of severe dehydration, you need to seek medical help and fast!



Do your best to prevent dehydration if hiking in extreme conditions.

Emergency services throughout Australia:

- New South Wales - [here](#) or [here](#)
- [Australian Capital Territory](#)
- Western Australia - [here](#) or [here](#)



- [Victoria](#)
- Queensland - [here](#) or [here](#)
- [South Australia](#)
- [Northern Territory](#)
- [Tasmania](#)

I hope this article has given you some helpful information and advice so that you know what to do should you get caught in the throes of a natural disaster, or injure yourself when in the wilderness. Safe and happy hiking everyone!

Have you ever had the worst happen to you when out in the bush? Let us know in the comments.