OUTDOOR BASICS

BY RICHARD GLENN

SIX WAYS TO AVOID COLD FEET

The chill that invades your winter boots can be prevented before you leave the comfort of your home.

which is why your feet become cold. Drinking a gallon of water a day is not unreasonable if you want to insure rozy toes.

2. Keep your feet loose in their boots. If anything is more common than dehydration, it’s cramping too many pairs of socks into too little space, which causes reduced circulation. Winter boots should be one, even two sizes bigger than summer boots. Your feet want to be well-insulated with layers of socks, but they should feel loose.

3. Wear a vapor barrier. Damp socks mean cold feet. Keep moisture from evaporating off your feet and soaking into your socks. Put your naked feet into a plastic bag or wear a thin polypropylene sock next to your skin. The sock should be one that wicks the wetness just far enough away from your skin to make you feel comfortable. Over the plastic put enough layers of thick dry socks to ensure insulation but avoid cramping your boots. If your boots are not waterproof, wear another layer of plastic over your socks to keep them dry.

A further note on vapor barriers: if you’re staying out overnight, take them off and dry your feet thoroughly as soon as camp is set. Letting your skin stay wet is hard on feet and can lead to complications like immersion foot (a painful cold-and-wet-induced injury).

4. Quit smoking, at least just before, and during, a trip into the cold outdoors. Smoking causes acute vasoconstriction (a shrinking of the blood vessels in your feet), which is a reaction to the chemicals you inhale. Reduced vessel size equals reduced circulation.

5. Use an anti-perspirant on your feet. Although this isn’t for everybody, some people whose feet sweat profusely report that they are more comfortable with an anti-perspirant rubbed into their skin. Others say it just makes their feet feel sticky. Still others prefer a foot powder, but powders tend to cake up, clog your socks, and require several re-applications during a long walk.

6. Wear a warm hat. When the brain is kept warm with its own added insulation, the feet are rewarded with more circulation.

So, now you’re ready to go. But first, a word of warning. It is difficult to distinguish between simple numb toes and frostbite. Don’t take chances and run the risk of a debilitating and permanent frostbite injury. When numbness sets in, stop and rewarm your feet. Passive skin-to-skin rewarming is the safest and best method, and a fine way to discover who your real friends are. Sit on something to insulate you from the ground, take off your boot, and press your cold toes against the bare skin of someone’s abdomen, right up underneath his clothing. In the meantime, stuff your boot underneath your own parka to keep it from freezing. Your feet (if not your friend) will thank you in the long run.

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Illustrated by Mike Newton