

Sleeping Bags for Camping: How to Choose

While backpacking bags focus on minimizing weight, sleeping bags for car or family camping are all about comfort. These bags are typically wider, softer, cushier and less expensive than their backpacking counterparts. Here's what to look for when shopping.



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Pick a Temperature Rating

A sleeping bag's **temperature rating** identifies the lowest temperature at which a bag is intended to keep the average sleeper warm. When a bag is described as a "20 degree bag," it means that most users should remain comfortable if the air temperature drops no lower than 20°F. These ratings assume that the sleeper is wearing a layer of [long underwear](#) and using a sleeping pad under the bag.

Metabolism varies from person to person, and sleeping bag temperature ratings vary from one manufacturer to the next. Use these ratings as a guide only—not a guarantee.

What Else Affects My Overall Warmth?

Besides the sleeping bag itself, these factors influence your warmth and comfort:

- **Sleeping pad:** This insulates the space between your bag and the cold ground (reducing convective heat loss) and adds a layer of cushioning.
- **Tent:** Using a tent traps another layer of "dead air" around you, warming it by up to 10°F.
- **Metabolism:** Are you a "cold sleeper" who prefers extra [insulation](#) when sleeping? Or are you a "warm sleeper" who kicks off the covers at home?
- **Gender:** Women generally prefer a bit warmer bag than men, up to 8°F warmer per EN (European Norm) testing on backpacking bags.
- **Clothing:** What you wear inside the bag makes a difference. Long underwear and clean socks help [insulate](#) you while also keeping body oils off of your bag. A cap and neck gaiter help retain body heat. For colder-than-expected nights, a fleece jacket and pants can help.
- **Hood:** Sleeping bags with hoods (more commonly found on backpacking bags) can be cinched up on cold nights to help retain warmth.
- **Hydration:** Staying hydrated adds warmth. Enjoy a warm drink before bed.

Tips on Choosing Wisely

Select a bag with a temperature rating a bit lower than the lowest temperature you expect to encounter. If you're headed for near-freezing temperatures, then choose a 20°F bag instead of a 35°F bag. If temperatures remain higher than expected, you can easily vent the bag to provide more air circulation.

Here's a general rule of thumb on temperature ratings:

Bag Type	Temperature Rating (°F)
Summer Season	+35° and higher
3-Season Bag	+10° to +35°
Cold Weather	-10° to +10°
Winter/Extreme	-10° and lower

Note: Most camping bags feature a temperature rating between +15°F and +50°F.



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Sleeping Bag Construction

How Do Sleeping Bags Work?

Sleeping bags keep you warm by trapping and holding a layer of "dead" (non-circulating) air next to your body. Your body heat warms this dead air, and the bag forms a barrier between it and the colder ground or outside air. The less air space there is to heat, the faster you warm up and stay warm. Camping bags are roomier than backpacking bags for greater comfort, with the tradeoff being less efficient warming of this dead space.

Sleeping Bag Insulation

Most campers choose bags with **synthetic insulation** (versus goose-down insulation) for its strong overall performance and friendly price tag. Typically made of polyester, a synthetic fill offers the following advantages:

- Quick-drying
- Insulates even if it gets wet
- Less expensive than down-filled bags
- Stands up to roughhousing kids and dogs
- Nonallergenic.

Goose-down insulation is offered in a few camping bags. It provides a more durable and compressible alternative to synthetic fill but features a slightly higher pricetag. **Water-resistant down**, such as DriDown™, is an emerging insulation option that combines goose down with a treatment that protects the down feathers from moisture.

Shell and Lining

The outer shell of a camping bag is typically made of a ripstop nylon or polyester for durability. Many synthetic-fill bags feature a shell fabric treated with a durable water repellent (DWR) finish. DWR is the stuff that allows water to bead up rather than soak through the fabric. Linings, on the other hand, promote the dispersal of body moisture, so DWR is not used here.

Tip: To tell if a shell has a durable water repellent (DWR) treatment, rub a wet cloth across the surface of a bag. If the water beads up, then it has DWR.

Shape and Fit

Most camping bags are designed with a **rectangular** shape for maximum comfort and roominess. If you choose 2 bags with compatible zippers, it's easy to mate them and create a double bed (see [zipper compatibility](#) details below). You can lay 2 bags on a queen-size air mattress for the utmost in outdoor sleeping comfort.



Optionally, **semirectangular** bags (or barrel-shaped bags) can be used for both camping and backpacking. Their tapered design offers greater warmth and efficiency than rectangular bags, but is still plenty roomy for a comfortable night's sleep. They are popular with larger-frame backpackers or restless sleepers who don't like the tight fit

of a mummy bag.

Women's Sleeping Bags

These bags are specifically designed and engineered to match a woman's contours. When compared to standard bags, women-specific

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bags are distinguished by the following characteristics:

- Shorter and narrower at the shoulders
- Wider at the hips
- Extra insulation in the upper body
- Extra insulation in the footbox.

Kids' Sleeping Bags

When the kids get a good night's sleep, so do you. Consider these child-friendly features when shopping for kids' bags:

- Some models feature a built-in sleeve on the bottom of the bag. This holds the sleeping pad so that your child, the bag and the pad stay together all night.
- Other bags accomplish the same thing with pad loops that attach the pad and the bag.
- Pillow pockets allow a jacket or backcountry pillow to be stuffed inside to create a cozy place for kids to lay their heads.
- Exterior pockets on the bag keep young explorers' headlamps, MP3 players and campsite keepsakes in easy reach.

Sleeping Bag Features

Once you've landed on a temperature rating, insulation and shape, consider these points.

Zipper compatibility: Some bags can be zipped together to create a double bed. You can mate any 2 sleeping bags IF:

- One bag has a "right-hand" zipper and the other a "left-hand" zipper.
Note: A right-hand zip means the bag opens and closes to your right when you are lying in the bag on your back.
- The zippers are the same size, style and roughly the same length.

Double-wide bags: Designed to comfortably sleep 2 people, roomy double-wide bags can be combined with an air mattress (or foam sleeping pad) for a cozy night's sleep. Most models zip apart to create 2 individual bags.

Hood: Camping in cooler temperatures? You'll lose a lot of heat through your head. Consider a semirectangular bag with a built-in hood. When cinched with a drawcord, the hood prevents heat from radiating away. Some hoods offer a pillow pocket that you can stuff with clothing to create a pillow.

Stash pocket: This keeps small items, such as an MP3 player, watch or glasses, close at hand.

Sleeping pad sleeve: On some bags, the underside insulation has been replaced with a sleeve to fit a sleeping pad. The result: no more rolling off the sleep pad in the middle of the night!

Pillow: Most of us need one for comfortable sleep. Some bags include a "pillow pocket" which allows you to stuff your clothes inside to create a pillow. You can also purchase a camp-specific pillow or, if you have room, simply bring your own pillow from home.

Sleeping bag liner: Slip a soft [sleeping bag liner](#) (sold separately) inside your bag to minimize wear and keep the bag clean. Layering in a liner adds 8° to 15°F of warmth, allowing a single bag to serve you in a wider variety of temperatures. Camping in very warm weather? Skip the bag and just sleep in the liner.

Stuff sack: Many bags come with a [stuff sack](#) (sold separately) to easily transport your bag. New or replacement stuff sacks are now sized by volume (liters) in addition to length x width dimensions.

Storage

You can prolong the life of any sleeping bag by hanging it in your garage or storing it loosely in a cotton storage sack—and not rolled up tight in a stuff sack. This long-term storage prevents the insulation from getting

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permanently compressed, which reduces its insulating properties.

For more info, see the REI Expert Advice article on [caring for your sleeping bag](#).

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