

WHOLE WOODS DIET

A guide to nutritious menu prep for back-of-beyond, long-haul excursions

BY LAURA LANCASTER

➔ **Backcountry travel** has a way of turning our frontcountry lifestyle on its head. We carry our homes on our backs. Mother Nature chooses our outfit each morning. Showers become an unimaginable luxury. And instead of eating a svelte 2,000 low-fat, high-fiber calories a day, we're eating twice that of all the foods we were taught to avoid: candy bars, potato chips, and macaroni and cheese.

Don't get me wrong. Snickers bars, potato chips, and mac and cheese are great wilderness food choices: shelf stable, calorically dense, with plenty of protein, fats, and carbohydrates to power our bodies for miles. But there is a good reason we don't feed our families a frontcountry diet consisting solely of backcountry staples. They lack the vitamins and minerals that our bodies need to stay healthy for the long haul.

Of course, the low nutritional density and short shelf-life of leafy greens and fresh fruits mean they aren't usually a viable choice for wilderness travel. But that doesn't mean that what our bodies need to stay healthy has changed—if anything those needs increase in the backcountry. And while a few days of subsisting on candy bars will leave you no worse for wear, the longer your diet is nutritionally compromised the more your health and physical fitness will deteriorate. The first problems may begin to appear after only a handful of days.

Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet, consectetur adipiscing elit. Donec vel ligula imperdiet massa gravida pellentesque a vitae urna. Sed at augue



Chris Eigenshau



Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet, consectetur adipiscing elit. Donec vel ligula imperdiet massa gravida pellentesque a vitae urna. Sed at augue

“Dried milk powder, such as Nido, is a great way to increase the calcium in your diet in the backcountry.”

Weeks 1-4: Vitamin Deficiency

Exhaustion is your constant companion. Bruises on your shoulders make the weight of your pack unbearable. The nosebleeds start.

Vitamin deficiency is often the first sign of malnutrition in the backcountry. While your body can store the fat-soluble vitamins (A, D, E, and K) for a number of weeks, water-soluble vitamins (C and B-complex) flush out of your system in a matter of days. Low-levels of these essential vitamins will quickly lead to serious health consequences, affecting everything from energy levels to immune system health. In the frontcountry, we keep our vitamin levels up by eating a healthy and varied diet, and one of the best ways to keep our vitamin levels up in the backcountry is to do the same. Air-dried and freeze-dried fruits and vegetables not only provide the vitamins our bodies need, but also provide a break from the monotony of oatmeal.

But just as our bodies can't store water-soluble vitamins long-term, the lack of water in air-dried and freeze-dried vegetables also takes a toll on its nutritional content. This is further compounded over time by exposure to air and heat. So even if you are eating as many fruits and vegetables in the backcountry as you would in the frontcountry, you may still not be getting the nutrients you require. Taking a daily multivitamin, while not a substitute for a healthy diet, can help to ensure you're getting enough of the water-soluble vitamins.

Months 1-3: Digestive Distress

It's your second bout of diarrhea today and it's not even noon. Your palms are sweating. Your stomach is in turmoil. Most food, and water, seems to pass straight through.

Before you jump to a worst-case

scenario—that you're suffering from food poisoning, or even worse, giardia—remember that backcountry travel is an extremely strenuous activity. You may be consuming twice or even three times the calories that you would normally eat in the frontcountry. Exposure to the elements—the wind, rain, and cold—will



Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet, consectetur adipiscing elit. Donec vel ligula imperdiet m

TOP-END TRAIL EATS

➔ There are hundreds of products at our disposal today that make creating a healthy and nutritious backcountry meal easier than ever. Thanks to modern freeze-drying techniques, you can purchase high-quality freeze-dried and air-dried fruits and vegetables, ready to eat straight from the bag, or include in a homemade backcountry meal. They are even starting to show up in snack form—kale chips, strawberry slices, and whole green beans that are rich in vitamins and minerals. Here are a few companies that create great-tasting, healthy products that you can use to create a backcountry meal plan for health, survival, and even taste.

further compound your caloric needs. To keep up with this huge influx, your digestive system must go into overdrive, producing enzymes at a rapid rate to transform your food into the energy you need to survive.

To conserve energy, your body may simply stop producing enzymes for certain types of foods, particularly those that are difficult to digest, or that you don't eat on a regular basis. Then, when you eat something you lack the correct enzymes for, your digestive tract will have no choice but to flush it out of your system, along with any beneficial bacteria that was aiding your digestion.

To maximize the nutrients your body is able to extract from your food, strive to eat a balanced, consistent diet. Simply put, your body is less likely to have a negative reaction to foods it is already producing digestive enzymes for. Another step you can take is to reinforce the beneficial bacteria in your digestive tract with the addition of a probiotic. Look for a shelf-stable brand in pill form that you can add to your daily vitamin regimen.

Months 3+: Mineral Depletion

It's only a matter of minutes after each break before you're out of breath again. Between that and the psoriasis covering your leg you don't how much longer you'll make it today. One more step and a muscle cramp leaves you crumpled on the ground.

Unlike vitamins, your body can store enough minerals to last several months. Eating healthy today goes a long way toward ensuring your body has the minerals it needs to survive in the wild. But when your reserves run low, the consequences can be dire. Women are particularly susceptible to the two most common mineral deficiencies: iron and calcium.

Iron is an essential component for carrying oxygen to muscles, and the stronger you become, the more oxygen your body uses. Insufficient iron in the body



➔ Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet, adipiscing elit. Donec vel ligula imperdiet massa

most commonly results in anemia, with symptoms ranging from headaches to fatigue to irregular

heartbeats. And once anemia sets in, it can take weeks to recover from. Eating iron-rich foods, such as red meats and leafy greens, both in the frontcountry and the backcountry, will help to ensure that your body has the iron it needs when it needs it.

Calcium is the mineral that keeps our bones healthy and strong, and nowhere is that more important than in the backcountry. Not only are we pounding out miles across difficult terrain, but we are also carrying a loaded backpack in addition to our own bodyweight. Dried milk powder, such as Nido, is a great way to increase the calcium in your diet in the backcountry. Also consider cutting out fruit dried with sulfur, as these may leach calcium from your body.

A Woman's Advantage

As women, we're used to struggling more than men to maintain a healthy weight in the frontcountry. Fat deposits that evolved to help our bodies carry a fetus to term during a time in human



Lorem ipsum dolor sit amet, consectetur adipiscing elit. Donec vel ligula imperdiet massa gravida pellentesque a vitae urna. Sed at augue

history when resources were scarce can be a major disadvantage for modern, sedentary lifestyles. But should the need arise to travel long distances through the backcountry, the physiological predisposition to hold onto body fat transforms from a major nuisance to a major advantage. Men, whose testosterone-fueled bodies are designed to build muscle mass, frequently have a difficult time maintaining a healthy body weight in the high-exertion, low-calorie environment of the backcountry. Women, meanwhile, more readily fall back on existing fat reserves to supplement their energy levels and help prevent muscle loss. Just a little advantage, courtesy of Mother Nature, that help women everywhere to survive and thrive in the wild. ☞

BOIL-IN-BAG MEALS

MOUNTAIN HOUSE
mountainhouse.com

BACKPACKER'S PANTRY
backpackerspantry.com

ALPINEAIRE alpineaire.com

GOOD TO-GO goodto-go.com

INGREDIENTS (FOR DIY'ERS)

NORTH BAY TRADING CO. north-baytrading.com

KAREN'S NATURALS shopkaren-naturals.com

HARMONY HOUSE FOODS harmony-housefoods.com

PACKIT GOURMET packitgourmet.com