

Tips & tricks for going to the bathroom and other bodily functions in the field

This document is an informal guide based on my own experience and what fellow field workers have taken the time to share with me. The intent is to provide some ideas, recommendations, and a variety of options for people** heading into the field. These tips are particularly tailored for cold/polar/glacial/sea ice environments and extended duration fieldwork, but much could be applied in other field settings.

Check out this great resource for field trip planners (aimed towards day-trips in less remote areas):

https://drive.google.com/file/d/15mLZgZWQvBXQRU_ok7OqnpUmxKObgwAm/view

**Following the lead of resources like the one linked above, we use terminology like “people who squat to pee” to reflect the fact that this group includes many women as well as some trans men, intersex, and non-binary people. Similarly, “people who menstruate” is not synonymous with “women”.

Very important: do not avoid proper hydration because you’re worried about peeing! Do not create a field environment where your teammates avoid proper hydration! This is one of the most critical recommendations raised by everyone.

Have a conversation with your teammates ahead of time about waste disposal expectations, privacy, etc. Provide people of all genders with menstruation information, and (especially if you have a new-to-the-field person) make sure they have the chance to ask questions ahead of time so they can pack appropriate items and be mentally prepared for what to expect.

Some helpful links with other perspectives:

<https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/voices/pumping-breast-milk-at-50-below/> (pumping in cold Arctic conditions + the importance of creating a culture that says YES!)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?reload=9&v=jjFZ1nzijrl&feature=youtu.be>

<http://dawninantarctica.blogspot.com/2013/09/womens-health-in-field.html> (discusses sexual activity in the field, currently not covered in this document)

https://www.army.mil/article/149411/maintaining_womens_health_during_deployment_tips_for_the_female_soldier (quick read summarizing general tips)

<https://blogs.scientificamerican.com/voices/one-more-barrier-faced-by-women-in-science/>

<https://fieldsecrets.wordpress.com/2018/06/05/finding-a-spot-and-poppin-a-squat/>

*If you are reading this and have additional tips, advice, etc., I'd love to hear it and include it here. **What did I miss? (please email: Chris Carr cgcarr@alaska.edu)** If you have experience pumping and/or nursing in the field, using ostomy bags in the field, or have any disability-related tips and advice please get in touch - these are known gaps in the document!*

A huge thank you to everyone who has contributed. If I've forgotten your name on the list, let me know.

Quick checklist of items to consider packing

- toilet paper
- hand sanitizer (personal small bottle for each person, plus a big one for the kitchen and a big one for the group toilet area if there is one)
- menstrual hygiene products, whether you menstruate or not, someone on your team probably does
- disposal containers for used products and toilet paper
- pee bottle, pee funnel
- more underwear than what is on (most) packing lists - bring breathable underwear!
- extra baby wipes
- medication for UTI's, yeast infections, PMS/cramps
- extra birth control if you use it
- small stuff-sack (not transparent) as your "toilet kit": large enough to hold mini hand sanitizer, pee funnel, some TP in a ziplock, enough hygiene products for a day, and disposal bags. Replenish each night in your tent.
- climbing harness: if you can, bring one with detachable leg loops ("drop seat" harness where leg loops detach/unclip from the back), that makes things much easier for bathroom-related tasks. You can also remain tied in and safe during these tasks.
- Pregnant? Bring: belly belt, panty liners, heavy pads (in first aid kit - in case of heavy bleed out), tylenol, anti-nausea pills
- Nursing/pumping? Bring: heavy pads or adult diapers (up to ~2 months post-partum); breast-pump kit: battery operated with extra batteries, manual to troubleshoot pump if malfunctions... happens more common than you think); backup manual breast pump (in case breast pump breaks); milk storage bags (if storing breastmilk); milk-savers (if storing breastmilk); white vinegar (to reduce sediment residue on bottles); tylenol; advil; prescription nipple cream; techniques to deal with clogged ducts
- any special items as required by in your specific field location

DETAILS:

Going pee and poo

- Best practices differ based on the environment, and some places have specific requirements you must adhere to. Discuss the plan with your team ahead of time and make sure you are bringing all the necessary sanitary equipment. Depending on the field site, you can check with (for instance) the National Park the site is located in, the US Antarctic Program, etc.
- In general:
 - In all settings, if your body didn't make it, plan on packing it out.
 - In some settings, poo will also be containerized and packed out.
 - In very few settings, pee will also need to be containerized.
- Check what the regulations are for your field area for human waste disposal
 - Can you bury it? How deep do you need to bury it?
 - If your field team is at a site for any amount of time: use wag bags, a poo bucket or a "group latrine" style giant poo excavation (follow local regulations and guidelines). Avoid creating "poo landmines" all around camp.
- Stress, different field food, medications, physical exertion can all affect your body's regular elimination routine. Speak up if you need a bathroom break, and respect other teammate's requests as well. When you gotta go, you gotta go!
- We cannot overemphasize the importance of hydration. Do not avoid drinking liquids to avoid peeing. Make sure everyone on the team knows this, and be aware that for other members of your team, there may be different challenges with going to the bathroom than what you experience based on anatomy, medical conditions, disability, experience in field settings, etc.
- One option if you are in an area with trees is to wrap a short rope around a tree. Hold the ends in your hands to stabilize yourself while squatting, this is especially great in steep terrain.

Privacy

- Assume that everyone wants privacy for bathroom-related tasks (e.g., not everyone who stands to pee is comfortable doing so with others nearby). Some field environments are more conducive to privacy than others. Discuss how to provide the best privacy possible in challenging settings ahead of time - for instance, on rope teams, on very small water craft, etc. We've heard, for instance, of field teams singing loudly on a small boat whenever anyone needed to use the bucket, to provide a bit of sound-related privacy. Be creative and support each other so everyone feels as comfortable as possible "using the facilities".
- Do not segregate by assumed gender ('women head to the left, men head to the right').
- A buddy system may be necessary for safety in (e.g., in areas with bears). Let people pick their own buddies and make sure they are comfortable with this person. You can also go in small groups of three.
- If travelling on rope teams, try to plan breaks in areas where people can safely be unroped for bathroom related tasks. Bring harnesses that allow people who squat to pee to do so (this is good for all genders for other tasks as well). When unroped breaks aren't feasible, give as much privacy as possible.

- For group toilet areas and the like, develop a “occupied/vacant” sign system so people don’t walk in on each other.

Poo buckets and wag bags.

- You may be required to use a “wag bag” (each person uses their own), poo in a shared poo bucket, or both.
- How to use a wag bag: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BpiX07wPKgE>
 - NOTE! Tie a knot in the inner bag, don’t just shove it in the outer bag like in the video.
 - NOTE! In many areas, there will be a specific place to throw the bags away at the end of the field season, not just the first trash can you encounter.
- Poo buckets aka “groovers” are some kind of canister, usually with a toilet seat on top for comfort. Your group might dispose of toilet paper and menstrual supplies in the bucket (cons: it fills faster) or might dispose of these items in a separate trash (cons: a bit of toilet paper in the poo bucket can help soak up extra liquid).
- Do your best to not pee in the wag bag or poo bucket. Squat-to-pee-ers in particular recommend trying to pee first off to the side before using the poo bucket or wag bag.
 - When you select the group poo bucket site, keep the squat-to-pee-ers as well as stand-to-pee-ers in mind. Is there a safe, private way to pee very close to the poo bucket?
- On some very small watercraft, it may be a “go over the side” sort of situation. Remember to bring a bucket for squat-to-pee-ers! Also a safer option for stand-to-pee-ers.
- On some military aircraft (i.e. going to/from Antarctica), you may encounter a toilet system similar to the group poo-bucket.

Menstrual hygiene products

- If you don’t menstruate, pack some tampons and/or pads in your personal first aid kit. Someone else on your field team probably does. In charge of the group first aid kit? Pack some there too.
- If you menstruate, bring at least enough sanitary products for $n+1$ periods where n is the number of periods you expect to have during the field season. Sometimes bodies behave differently, and plenty of people get “bonus” periods, late, early, or missed periods while in the field.
- People who have overwintered in Antarctica report that your period may (very likely) change quite drastically, especially if you are overwintering and have an extended darkness/polar night. Anecdotally, their periods also got much “worse” (i.e. heavier, longer, more painful, more frequent, etc.) during the winter. Apparently there is very little research on the topic, but one contributor’s experience seems to be quite common, i.e. *“as soon (literally the week of) sundown it started to go crazy and only normalised a good 6-9 months after sunup. Therefore, bring way more than you think you would ever need (menstruators in future teams will be grateful of items left over!)”*.
- Some people who use applicator-less tampons at home prefer to use applicators in the field since sometimes it is hard to ensure clean hands. Cons: extra waste to manage.
- Diva cups and other cup-collection methods may or may not be feasible, consider using pads/tampons in the harsh extended field settings with limited water. I have heard a few success

stories, but they are few and far between and tend to be in short-term fieldwork settings and/or where water is more available. However, in some environments, many fieldworkers swear by the cups. As always, menstru-strategies vary widely from person to person and field setting to field setting. Pros: less waste! And, you won't ever run out of period supplies. Contributors recommend: Diva cups and Luna cups (<https://divacup.com/> and <https://lunacups.com/>)

- Use unscented products in the field, even if you prefer scented at home.
- Cold weather tip: when you are on your period, store your next tampon/pad in a nice warm pocket of your coat close to your body ahead of time so you don't have a frozen cold one when you need it. With pads/pantliners, the adhesive sticks much better to your underwear if you've warmed the pad ahead of time in your pocket.
- Different folks prefer pads, tampons, cups, or a combination thereof for a variety of reasons. If you're in charge of planning toilet/trash disposal for your team, don't assume/require that people use one thing or another. Provide information for a variety of menstu-strategies.

Menstrual hygiene products disposal methods

- In general, treat menstrual hygiene products like toilet paper (pack it out!) rather than like poo or pee which you may be able to leave behind.
- If your team is using a poo bucket at camp and wag bags away from camp: folks put their menstrual products either in the poo bucket (if TP goes in the bucket), used toilet paper trash (if team is not putting TP in the poo bucket), or keep a personal disposal bag just for these.
- Away from a camp toilet, here are some options.
 - Put it in your wag bag (if your team is using these). Pros: great leak/odor protection, discrete; Cons: you might be wanting to save that space for your poo, and you have to open up a wag bag that might already have poo in it when you just need to change your tampon/pad. You can always dedicate a wag bag just for used products.
 - Regular ziplock and cram as many used items in there as you can. Pros: easy, can dispose of many in one bag; Cons: risk of leaking, not discrete, no odor protection (Tip from a reader: pre-tape some ziplocks with duct tape around them if you want to be more discreet!)
 - Double ziplock plus method: 2 gallon ziplocks, put a healthy scoop of baking soda in the inner bag to help with odor and absorb extra liquid, outer bag is in case of leaks. When using this method, I bring a couple of these per period I expect to have in the field, and use each bag for several days. Pros: good leak/odor protection, less waste than individual bag methods, Cons: not discrete, bulky
 - I've also used these: <https://maskit.us/collections/retail-products/products/duo-pack> and they work. They come in "tampon" and "pad" size - a regular pad or tampon with applicator can fit in the "tampon size" if need be. Pros: If you seal them properly, they are leak-proof and great odor control. Very discrete disposal since the bags are opaque. Cons: you need a new little baggy for each hygiene product. The seal is a sticky thing (warm it up first in cold temps) and once you seal it, you can't reopen it.
- Whatever storage method you choose, I recommend storing used menstrual products away from your tent if there are any critters around who may be interested in your used products (mice, ravens, etc.).

- From one contributor: “In grizzly terrain, I have personally incinerated used cotton tampons over my Whisperlite. This takes some time and for someone who bleeds a lot, might be a hassle that they wouldn't want to deal with. It involves incinerating on a, in a professional situation, designated Whisperlite outside of the cook tent. Not exactly a discreet process”
- Note on bears: I have yet to hear of anyone having trouble with bears because of menstruation or menstrual products, despite many menstruating folks (myself included) doing plenty of fieldwork in bear country (grizzly, black, and polar bears). Store your period stuff mindfully, but don't over stress about it. Remember that other non-bear critters (mice, marmots) might still like to chew a hole in your tent to get to any 'food' (aka used hygiene) items. And bears aren't attracted to people who are menstruating, this is a myth!

Pee bottle

- These are great once you get the hang of it for saving a midnight trip out of the tent. If you have a tent mate, discuss pee bottle use ahead of time and work out how to respect each other's privacy, etc.
- Buy a wide-mouth 1 L 'nalgene'-type (with the proper strong screw on lid) water bottle and practice in the shower. Some folks who stand or squat to pee prefer to pee directly in the nalgene (you can stand or squat to do this), some typically “squat to pee-ers” prefer using a funnel (but you stand to pee with a funnel.) Practice ahead of time!
- Check with your team for where to empty your pee bottle in the morning if you aren't sure. Do not let it freeze overnight (if it is cold, you may need to put it in your sleeping bag with you).
- A few areas require containerization and removal of all pee from the field site (for instance: Dry Valleys, Antarctica) - there you will have to use a pee bottle when away from camp, and a pee bucket or pee bottle at camp.
- Label all pee bottles as such, and don't mix them up with your water bottles.

Pee funnels

- These come in a wide variety of shapes and sizes. Some folks prefer to use a funnel, some don't. For squat-to-pee-ers who prefer to pee directly into the bottle, it helps to (gently) press the bottle up against one's body rather than try to hit it from any distance.
- Some folks find funnels to be awesome when it is really cold and windy, if there is no privacy and you want to stay more dressed, or if you are using a pee bottle.
- Cold weather tip: If you are wearing long underwear and carhartt bibs, you can unbutton the sides, and reach in with the funnel and pee without needing to expose anything except the funnel tube! If you plan on this, make sure you have a zippered fly (some folks sew an extra zipper on the front of the leg of their carhartts that is at a better angle for the funnel tube to come out).
- If you are in a cold climate, you may want to consider buying 'men's' long underwear even if you typically wear 'women's' long underwear. From one contributor: *“the opening is nice but even better is that there is more fabric in the crotch so it is easier to pull down”*.
- Whatever you pick, PRACTICE as home, in the shower. For many squat-to-pee-ers, it takes some practice relaxing the muscles to pee standing up, and you want to practice getting the seal and flow right to prevent leaks.

- If you are using a funnel, be sure to clean it regularly in the field so you stay healthy. For instance: after each use, wipe funnel with a piece of toilet paper and store in a ziplock in toilet kit stuff sack. In the tent at night, clean it thoroughly with baby wipes and/or hand sanitizer and let it dry fully.
- Many people recommend the Freshette: <http://www.freshette.com/>

Extra underwear and baby wipes

- Pack baby wipes. Use these for foot care, personal hygiene - especially when/if you have your period, cleaning pee funnels, trust me you want these! I recommend the unscented/"sensitive" ones.
- Cold weather tip: when your baby wipe stash freezes, break off a small chunk from the frozen stack and put in a ziplock inside your coat during dinner, so they are thawed enough by the time you head to the tent at night.
- Pack more underwear than what the packing list says! Bring breathable underwear! This helps you stay healthy. See next section. If you can, bring a variety of underwear (and bra) styles so you they don't rub or chafe in the same spots every day.
- Some people recommend spending the money on the more expensive "travel" or "backpacking" style quick-dry underwear. Wash & clip to tent and it will dry quickly, even in the cold. Other folks recommend cheap cotton undies, and just bring plenty so you can change every day.
- Some people bring extra pantyliners/very thin pads and swap these out frequently in replacement of some underwear changes.

Medications for UTI's, yeast infections

- If you have a history of urinary tract infections (UTI's) and/or yeast infections, consider asking your doctor to give you a prescription for whatever you usually use to treat it.
- If you are going on a long (multi-week) remote field campaign for the first time and don't know how your body will respond, consider asking for some antibiotics/treatments for UTI and yeast infection even if you have never had one. Talk with your doctor to make sure you know the symptoms well enough to self-diagnose.
- Hopefully you don't need these medications! Proper, diligent hygiene can help prevent them - but some people are more susceptible than others and you may get one despite your best efforts. Use hand sanitizer before and after changing menstrual hygiene products and using pee funnels. Avoid scented lotions, baby wipes, menstrual products. Many people have had at least one UTI in the field before, even if they have never had one at home.
- Remember to bring whatever medications you typically use for PMS/cramps, and other period-related pain.
- People prone to UTIs recommend symptom-alleviating over the counter medications as well (e.g., Uristat, Cystix), and one contributor recommends baking soda + water. There are also prescription symptom relievers, check with your doctor. Be aware: most if not all of the symptom relievers will dramatically change the color of your pee so don't be surprised. One contributor reports Cystix changed her pee to a bright orange and the prescription one changed her pee to blue.

- One of the main recommendations for people experiencing a UTI is to hydrate, hydrate, hydrate since this helps flush your system. Proper hydration also help prevent UTIs.
- One person said: *I only had one day left to get measurements and didn't want to be taken out by something that would be super fun to explain to all my men colleagues. Additionally, I believe that part of the reason I got it (UTI) was from holding in my pee all day in the field as I didn't have a pee funnel, was cold and windy, and on a flat ice sheet with only men that I didn't know well. I'm older and wiser now!*
- Itchiness in the genital region can result from a variety of things. Vagisil anti-itch medicated wipes (individually wrapped) can be very helpful.
- As always, consult with your doctor, and be aware of potential allergic reactions if you are using a new product (anti-itch wipe, yeast infection cream, etc).
- Pill and suppository-type yeast infection treatments may be easier to manage than topical cream, though many people like the topical cream for symptom relief.

Birth control

- As with any medication that you take regularly, bring extra in case you lose it. Remember to include travel and possible delays, especially for Antarctic deployments. Be aware that in some countries or with some insurance carriers, it may be difficult to obtain more than a few months supply of medication. Plan extra time to obtain the medication you need before you leave for the field, don't leave this for the last minute.
- Some people prefer to try to skip their periods if possible - check with your doctor if this is a good option for you if use a hormonal birth control method.
- Nuvarings and similar potentially temperature-sensitive medications: check with your doctor about if these can be frozen safely or not.

Pumping and nursing

- If you will be pumping during fieldwork, plan ahead with your team to ensure you have access to the power, sanitary, privacy, and storage resources you need. Many people have successfully done this!
- Even in polar regions where we worry about things freezing, it can be very challenging to keep things reliably frozen. Saving the milk you pump may not be very feasible - check with your team for options. If you are not saving your milk, check with your team about the best place to dispose of it - potentially with the kitchen grey water.
- Power supplies: check that your pump's power requirements are compatible with what your field team is bringing. Bring extra batteries!
- Talk with your doctor about bringing antibiotics for mastitis or other potential nursing-related health concerns. Discuss what you can do in the remote field setting to try to prevent these, and how to treat them if they arise.
- Consider bringing a separate cook pot that will be dedicated only for you and your pumping supplies so you can sanitize/clean your equipment.
- Have a plan for each place you might need to pump. For instance, if the science site is far from the campsite, you might store a spare tent/sleeping bag/thermarests at the science site so you can pump out of the wind.

I hope that helps you and your teammates! Please feel free to share this information.

Best wishes for all your field endeavors!

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A huge thank you to everyone who has contributed. If I've forgotten your name on the list, let me know so I can add you.