

## Health Risks in the Wilderness

If you travel into the wilderness, forests or parks, you should be aware of certain health risks.

### Preparing for the wilderness

Be prepared before travelling into the wilderness, forests or parks.

Check your equipment before you leave home to ensure that you have everything you need. Pack for the wilderness according to the season, your destination and the length of your trip. Some gear to pack may include:

- Food and drink;
- Extra clothing in case of a sudden drop in temperature;
- Proper footwear;
- Rain gear;
- First Aid kit;
- Flashlight;
- Pocket knife;
- Waterproof matches;
- Candles to provide heat and light;
- Lightweight emergency blanket;
- Plastic tarp and a roll of duct tape for repairing gear; and
- Insect repellent, sunscreen and other toiletries as needed.

Travel in groups of three or more whenever possible. This way, if someone is injured, one person can stay with the victim while the other goes for help. In addition, know your physical abilities and limitations, and hike on trails within your ability. Be sure to carry a compass

and a map of the area where you will be travelling.

### Drinking water

Parasites, such as Giardia and Cryptosporidium, can cause diarrhea, abdominal cramps, nausea and/or vomiting, weight loss, and fatigue lasting up to several weeks. These parasites can be carried by humans, as well as by certain domestic and wild animals.

These parasites can get into any surface water, such as lakes, streams and rivers. They can contaminate drinking water or water used for human consumption.

Water quality and safety can also be affected by humans practicing unhealthy, backcountry hygiene. If proper toilet facilities are not available, human wastes should be buried away from streams and other bodies of water.

Backcountry travellers should always boil water for at least two minutes, or chemically treat water before drinking it or brushing their teeth.

### Wild animals

The experienced traveller avoids close contact with wild animals for safety reasons and to avoid disruption of their normal activities.

Animals are potentially dangerous if approached too closely, especially bears and female moose with calves. Be careful and keep your distance. Always remember that wild animals can carry a variety of diseases.

Travellers in parks, forests and other wilderness areas should not attempt to feed or touch any wild animals. Special care should be taken to avoid contact with any animal that appears to be ill or dead. If you are bitten or scratched by a wild animal, or bitten by a flea or tick, you should consult a doctor.

**Contact your local health unit or family doctor if you have been bitten or scratched by an animal that is behaving strangely or seems to be sick, or if you think a bat may have been in the room or tent while you were sleeping.**

As bats have tiny sharp teeth, bite or scratch marks usually go unnoticed. For this reason if the person has contact with a bat and cannot rule out the possibility that they have been bitten, scratched or licked, they should be treated. Examples of this type of contact are a child alone in a room with a bat, or waking and finding a bat in a room or tent.

### **Fleas, ticks and other insects**

Fleas and ticks are tiny insects that can bite or burrow part way into your skin and draw blood out before dropping off. They can carry and spread a number of diseases.

If you find a tick set in or under your skin, the best way to remove it is by grasping and pulling it gently, straight up and out with a small pair of tweezers. Disinfect the area with rubbing alcohol. Do not touch the tick with your hands. You may wish to save the tick in a small plastic or glass container for later inspection by your doctor, especially if a fever develops, or the area around the bite appears to be infected.

Other insect bites may also cause concerns. Some people may have severe allergic reactions to bee and wasp stings, and should carry appropriate medication as prescribed by their doctor.

Mosquitoes may carry West Nile Virus. To protect against insect bites, use insect repellent on all uncovered skin and wear loose fitting, long-sleeved shirts and pants.

If you have any concerns about any insect bite, contact your doctor.

**For more information on wilderness health and safety, see BC HealthFiles:**

[#01 Tick Bites and Disease](#)

[#07 Rabies](#)

[#10 Giardiasis \("Beaver Fever"\)](#)

[#26 Sun-smart Your Kids](#)

[#41a Health Advice for Travellers](#)

[#47 Blue-green Algae Blooms](#)

[#48 Cryptosporidiosis](#)

[#49b How to Disinfect Drinking Water](#)

[#52 Swimmer's Itch](#)

[#88 West Nile Virus](#)

For more information on wilderness activities and recreation, visit the [BC Parks](#) Web site at [www.env.gov.bc.ca/bcparks/](http://www.env.gov.bc.ca/bcparks/).

**For more BC HealthFile topics visit [www.bchealthguide.org/healthfiles/index.stm](http://www.bchealthguide.org/healthfiles/index.stm), or visit your local public health unit.**

**Call the BC NurseLine to speak to a registered nurse, available 24-hours every day:**

- In Greater Vancouver, call 604-215-4700
- In BC, call toll-free 1-866-215-4700
- Deaf and hearing-impaired, call 1-866-889-4700
- Pharmacist available 5pm to 9am every day
- Translation services in over 130 languages upon request.

**Visit BC HealthGuide OnLine – a world of health information you can trust at [www.bchealthguide.org](http://www.bchealthguide.org)**