

# FOOD STORAGE ON THE TRAIL



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Before setting out on an overnight backpacking trip, you will want to decide how to store your food while you are sleeping.

## Why is proper food storage important?

It is probably obvious that proper food storage is important to protect you and your food from bears, mice, and other wildlife that are searching for their next meal. What might not be as obvious is that proper food storage also helps to protect wildlife as well as backpackers that use the same campsite in the future.

When bears and other wildlife are successful in getting at your food, they will come back to that spot in the future to try their luck again. Over time, they can become habituated to our food, lose their natural wariness of people, and become aggressive. When there are conflicts between humans and wildlife, wildlife ultimately loses - for example, aggressive bears may be relocated or euthanized.

## Are there requirements about how to store food when backpacking?

Some jurisdictions do have food storage requirements. They might require the use of a bear canister or another method of food storage. Make sure to check before setting out. On the Appalachian Trail in 2021, a bear canister is only required on a 5-mile portion of the trail in Georgia for overnight camping between Jarrod Gap and Neel's Gap.

## What are the recommended food storage methods for backpackers?

There are three methods for storing food that are recommended for overnight backpacking – bear canisters, “bear hangs”, and Ursacks®. Each method has advantages and disadvantages. If there are no food storage requirements in the area where you will be backpacking, you can choose any one of these three options.

**Bear Canisters:** Bear canisters are hard-sided, cylindrical containers with a locking mechanism. While no food storage method is completely “bear-proof”, bear canisters have proven to be the most effective way to prevent bears and other wildlife from gaining access to food. They can be left on the ground overnight, so they are easy to

use, and can double as a camp seat. The primary disadvantages of bear canisters are that they weigh more than other food storage methods (most canisters weigh 2-3 pounds) and are bulky. Many hikers have found that the ease and security provided by bear canisters more than compensate for the weight and bulk and choose to use them even in areas where they are not required. The Interagency Grizzly Bear Committee has a list of bear canisters that have passed its testing protocol. <http://igbconline.org/certified-products-list/>



**“Bear Hangs”**. Another way to store your food is to hang your food bag in a tree. This is a light-weight food storage method, requiring only a food bag, a carabiner, 50 feet of rope or cord, and optionally a rock sack. It can, however, be exceedingly difficult and time consuming to do a proper bear hang, and this method is not as reliable even when done correctly.

Because your food bag should be hung at least 12 feet off the ground, 6 feet from the tree trunk, 6 feet below the limb, and 200 feet away from your campsite, finding a tree that will work and getting your rope over the right branch can be an onerous task at the end of a long day. If you choose this method of food storage, learn how to do a “PCT Style” bear hang and practice in advance.

<https://theultimatehang.com/2013/03/19/hanging-a-bear-bag-the-pct-method/>

**Ursacks**. Ursacks (Ursack Almitry see pic, is preferred) are soft-sided food sacks made from wildlife-resistant material. Ursacks® are usually tied around the trunk of a tree or on a low hanging branch, so they are easier to use than doing a bear hang. Ursacks® are heavier than a bear hang kit but lighter and less bulky than a bear canister. Although Ursacks® are generally effective at preventing bears and other wildlife from accessing your food, a bear can crush the contents of an Ursacks®, making your food inedible. The company makes an aluminum liner that can help prevent your food from being crushed, but the liner will add weight and bulk. If you choose to use one, make sure you get the model that meets your needs – Ursack Almitry® is the rodent and bear resistant model – and be sure to practice the correct way to close and secure it.



<https://ursack.com/pages/how-to-use-ursack-bear-bags>

## What about odor barrier bags?

Odor barrier bags such as Opsaks® look like heavy duty Ziplock® bags but help to seal in food odors. These bags alone are not a recommended method for storing your food, but they are a good addition to any of the recommended food storage methods – they can be used inside a bear canister, bear hang, or Ursack®

## Aren't there facilities for storing food at some shelters and campsites?

Yes. Some campsites and shelters will provide bear cables, boxes, or poles for storing food. Those are all great food storage options when they are available. Most campsites and shelters, however, do not have such food storage facilities. Even if you know that the site where you plan to camp has these facilities, they may be full, or you may end up camping somewhere else – so you should always be prepared with your own food storage method.

# Is there anything other than food that needs to go in my bear canister, bear hang, or Ursack?

Yes. You should include garbage and other “smellables” – toothpaste, lip balm, and anything with a smell that might attract wildlife.

Below is a drawing presentation of a PCT Hang.

## HANGING A BEAR BAG—THE “PCT” METHOD

Illustration ©2013 by Derek Hansen, TheUltimateHang.com

If hung “upside down” be sure to tie a slippery overhand knot to prevent the cord lock from loosening



The bear bag should be big enough for all food, trash, and “smellable” items.

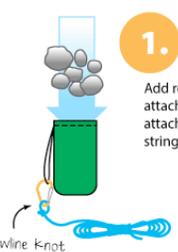
Bags with a webbing strap or loop are ideal

**EQUIPMENT**

- Bear Bag
- 40 ft (12 m) Rope
- Throw/Rope Bag
- Mini Carabiner
- Small Twig

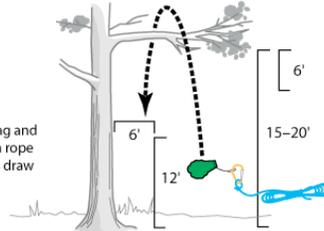


**1.** Add rocks to throw bag and attach carabiner (with rope attached) to the bag’s draw string to secure.



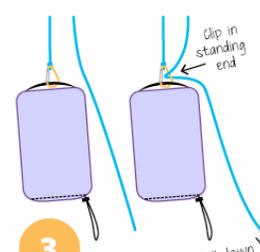
Tie a bowline knot on the carabiner

**2.** Toss the throw bag over a sturdy branch that is 15–20 ft (4.5–6 m) above the ground.



**NOTE:** When properly hung, the bear bag should hang at least 12 ft (4 m) above the ground and 6 ft (~2 m) down from the branch and away from the tree trunk.  
(See <http://Int.org/blog/hanging-bear-bag>)

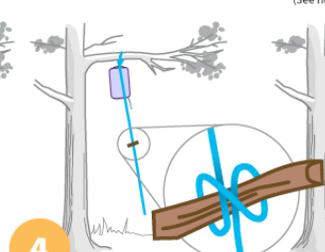
**3.** Unclip throw bag from carabiner. Clip carabiner to bear bag. Feed loose end of the rope through carabiner and pull loose end to raise the bear bag to the top of the tree branch.



Clip in standing end

Pull down

**4.** Reach as high as you can and tie a clove hitch around the twig on the loose end of the rope, creating a toggle.



**5.** Release the loose end of the rope. The bear bag will stop at the toggle.

