

## Whats in your first aid kit Doc?

First Aid.

“The immediate assistance that one provides to another person suffering from illness or some kind of injury”. Head with bandage emoji.



For me, whether its climbing, tramping or mountain biking it's about having a degree self sufficiency in dealing with simple slip, trip or fall when you're out and about. I'm going to offer some thoughts around what (and why) you might carry in a basic personal outdoor first aid kit.

Its worth remembering that in the scheme of things first aid is relatively modern idea ..... Standards in healthcare and hygiene began to significantly improve at the end of the 19th Century, and around this time it was realised that much of the (unnecessary) losses and suffering caused by wars could be minimised to some extent. Simple life and limb saving procedures could be taught or trained to willing volunteers. This is how organisations like the Red Cross and St John came to be the ones we know and trust with this subject today.

But ask 20 different people, whats in a first aid kit? And I suspect that they might all give you slightly different answers.

For many climbers their first aid kits might only include a minimal penknife and a roll of tape. Which in many respects is a legitimate choice. I know some that use their first aid kit as a repository for a cheeky emergency chocolate stash .... For others it might include an awful lot more stuff to deal with those, “but what if ‘X’ happens” emergencies.

Which brings us to an important point. The kit you carry should mirror the hazard and risk of an issue occurring, balanced against the needs of the endeavour being undertaken, and the level of risk an individual is prepared to accept. Perhaps this is easier to explain with an example. In Alex Honnold's 2018 free solo of Freerider in Yosemite, a first aid kit was totally superfluous to his requirements. In preparation for the ascent Alex obviously came to terms with, and understood the magnitude of the risks he was taking on and was clearly prepared to accept them. What one individual deems an acceptable risk might be very different to another. Which is the reason why getting a consensus on what one might want or need to carry can be a tough call to make.

Obviously to make use of a first aid kit on a trip you have to be carrying it with you .... and if the kit is ginormous and weighs a ton it is going to start causing more problems than it solves. Also first aid is just that - to stabilise an issue that either sorts itself out, or fixes it for long enough till the cavalry arrives. So while there are exceptions to everything, common things are common and it is those simple common injuries that the average outdoor man or woman should plan for, e.g. the slip, trip or fall. Thinking along the lines of, what is the minimum I might sensibly get away with here.

It is also probably worth mentioning that a personal first aid kit is not necessarily for group or expedition use. Medical provision for a team or group of people is a different kettle of fish, and places an entirely different slant on what and why items are carried (and who might be providing the care).

Broadly a good personal first aid kit should tick the following boxes.

- Lightweight.

- Life and Limb saving.
- Low cost.
- Lots of uses.

For these reasons, I enjoy making my own first aid kit. I think it's also more effective if you have put it together yourself, it gives you a bit more ownership of the thing. Plus, 'curating' your own bespoke kit is fun and for real outdoor nerds can even get quite competitive. My own first aid box, 2 person group shelter and head torch comes in at 430 grams ....

So, below are two lists, one with items that you might find in a small first aid kit. Second, of items that you might be carrying, or sharing anyway as part of a trip - but can form part of a first aid response.

First Aid kit items: -

- **Record keeping** - *Casualty report form / notebook etc ... I carry a couple of sheets of waterproof paper and a cut down pencil. Useful to record grid references. Injuries findings. Vital signs. Writing things down when your mind is racing is one less thing to remember.*
- **Non adherent dressings** - useful for wounds / grazes with a light amount of 'leakage'
- **Tape** - *Duct tape / Micropore tape to secure dressings / things in place. Duct tape can be used to make bandages, splint things, prevent sunburn to your nose or blisters on your hands and feet - endless uses.*
- **A wound dressing** - *to put over a bleeding wound and soak up blood. Military ones are good. Sanitary towels / pads also work extremely well. One is usually enough.*
- **Safety pins** - *One or two large ones can secure bandages, decompress blisters etc ...*

- **Blister dressing** - *Type of adhesive dressing for use with blisters, e.g. Compeed, Moleskin etc ... Blisters prevention or fixing them early can prevent them ruining a trip*
- **A bandage / support bandage / Triangular bandage** - *Used to hold a dressing in place, splint a limb or provide support to muscle or a joint. Some clever people now carry a tiny roll of cling film to do all these jobs and more ...*
- **Plasters / Steristrips** - *For minor cuts / closing minor wounds.*
- **Medications** - *Simple, over the counter painkillers like, paracetamol and ibuprofen are enough. Antihistamines like loratadine or cetirizine work well against bites or stings. Half a strip of each in a separate bag is all you need. I'd also suggest that for those on medications for long term conditions, a note of the name, dose and timings is useful for others in the party.*
- **Container** - *Worth giving a little thought to this. Often the container varies according to the activity and the trip. I used to do a lot of caving and carried a tiny first aid kit in a ziplock sandwich bag either stuffed between the helmet and its cradle (next to a deformed Mars bar). For tramping or climbing trips a tiny dry bag can work well as its flexible and packs easily, (some have a clear window on the side so you can see what you're after). A tiny plastic food box which is pretty indestructible also works well. It's almost a law of nature that we will fill the space we are given. It's the same with rucksacks and it's the same with containers for first aid kit, so think small and make it work.*

Trip Items: -

- **Shelter** - *Survival blanket / bivy bag / group shelter / tent fly*
- **Scissors / a blade** - *For cutting tape / dressings / clothes if necessary / fighting orcs etc ... I have a tiny Swiss Army knife (other brands are available) stashed in my first aid kit compete with scissors, tweezers etc ...*

- **Soft sweets / food** - *Prevention / treatment. Easy to digest food is best for exhausted or hypothermic casualties.*
- **Torch** - *Head torches are useful, though most cell phones have them now*
- **Sunglasses** - *Preventative medicine. I have seen alpinists in enormous amounts of pain, barely able to see after forgetting they're sunglasses for a day!*
- **Lip balm / Lip block** - *Also preventative. Cracked sore lips on a multi-day trip can be really debilitating. Also best not to share (to avoid cold sores)*
- **Walking poles** - *Preventative? Especially useful in river crossings but can double as for splinting.*

There are heaps of additional things that could easily be debated and added to this list, and in some respects that part of the point.

I think its also worth acknowledging that it is now a reality that for many their phone is also part of their emergency kit. True, they break. True, they don't have signal when you need it. True, they run out of battery when you least want it etc ... Nevertheless they are ubiquitous and they are having an impact saving lives on an almost daily basis in urban areas. For example performing Cardio Pulmonary Resuscitation, (CPR) can genuinely save a life. Smart phone Apps like the 'St John NZ CPR & AED app', with its step by step guide to CPR, and Automatic Electrical Defibrillation (AED) use is simple and brilliantly executed. Similarly, the 'GoodSAM App', using your phones camera to livestream you and the victim to a paramedic are really starting to change the game in this area. I now carry both these apps on my phone, to help me locate the nearest AED and provide a metronome to pace chest compressions when my mind is probably on other things ....

Final thought. Although technology may well start having an impact on first aid in the outdoors, it's the ability to problem solve that is probably the most

important bit of kit that never really gets a mention. A damaged arm held up by tucking a jacket up over it is quicker and almost as effective as the old triangular bandage and perfectly illustrates this kind of thinking. I would contend that the ability to be creative and flexible when plans, situations and events change is something that goes hand in hand with having great adventures and managing risk well.

Have fun and stay safe!

Dr Robin Barraclough

Fellow Royal New Zealand College General Practitioners

#### References

<https://www.qa.stjohn.org.nz/First-Aid/CPR-App/>

<https://www.goodsamapp.org/home>