

Survival Skills

finding water



Not again! My water filter just quit on me, and I have a seven day hike out of the backcountry to civilization. I will have to find a safe water source soon before I move down the trail. When looking for water, common sense and observation are the greatest tools to keep yourself hydrated. Before you set out to find this precious gift, remember water likes to travel downhill and collect in low places. Listen for the sounds of water-loving insects, amphibians and birds. Also, look for water-loving plants and trees such as willows, cattails and rushes.

Lakes, rivers and streams are the first types of water people will look for in a survival situation. Of these three, streams are the most desirable. The fact is that most pollutants, micro-organisms, fecal matter and suspended materials travel briefly through these water systems and end up in higher concentrations in lakes. Water found farther upstream near the source is cleanest and is your best bet. Stay away from stagnant, calm or smelly water, which tends to have a greater likelihood of hosting giardia, amoebic dysentery, E. coli and salmonellas.

Once you have found a fast-flowing stream, filtering can be accomplished by simply running the water through a T-shirt, several pieces of

gauze or cheese cloth and into your water bottle. Removing suspended particles helps improve taste and cuts down on your chances of digesting an undesirable organism.

Purifying water is easily done if you carry some iodine in your first-aid kit. This will kill any unfriendly swimmers in your water bottle. Make sure the iodine is at least a 2% mixture; check the percentage and expiration date before use. Just add 8-10 drops to one quart of water and let sit for fifteen minutes. If you don't have iodine, another option is to put your filtered water in a pan and boil it for a minimum of fifteen minutes. However, using iodine can conserve fuel needed for cooking on long hiking trips. If my iodine runs out, I will cut back on meals and use my remaining fuel to boil water and keep myself hydrated. 🏕️

—Shawn Grose