



5 Wilderness First Aid Situations Every Hiker Should Be Ready for This Fall, Winter, and Beyond

by David Oliver, PSAR Chair
and The PSAR Committee

1 Hypothermia

Hypothermia is one of the most important cold-weather problems for hikers to recognize. It develops as the body loses heat faster than it can replace it. Cold temperatures, wind, rain, wet clothing, exhaustion, inadequate food, and long periods of inactivity can all contribute.

Early signs may include persistent shivering, loss of coordination, slower movement, confusion, unusual behavior, or difficulty completing simple tasks. The earlier these changes are noticed, the more options a hiking group has. The person may need shelter from wind and precipitation, dry insulation, additional layers, food and warm fluids when they can swallow normally, and a plan for ending the hike.

The key is recognition; a hiker may look tired or irritable before the group realizes that a rapidly declining body temperature is the culprit. Wilderness First Aid training teaches people to notice these changes and respond in an organized way

2 Ankle Injuries

Ankle injuries are easy to picture because almost every hiker has slipped, rolled an ankle, or taken an awkward step. Wet leaves can hide rocks and roots, mud can pull at a boot, snow can conceal uneven ground, and ice can turn an ordinary section of trail into a difficult crossing.

After an ankle injury, the first question is more than whether the person can stand. The group needs to examine what happened, where the pain is located, whether swelling or deformity is present, and whether the injured person can put weight on the foot. Continuing to walk on a serious injury can make the situation harder to manage.

A Wilderness First Aid course gives hikers practice assessing, supporting, and deciding the next steps for an injured person. Those choices are much easier when practiced beforehand.

3 Wrist Injuries

When people fall, they often reach out with their hands to protect themselves. That natural reaction can transfer the force of the fall into the wrist. A hiker may have pain, swelling, weakness, or limited movement even when the injury does not look dramatic.

A wrist injury can also affect the rest of the trip. The person may have difficulty using trekking poles, putting on a backpack, adjusting clothing, holding onto rocks, or protecting themselves during another slip. The group has to look beyond the immediate pain and consider how the injury changes the person's ability to travel.

Learning how to assess circulation, sensation, movement, tenderness, swelling, and the mechanism of injury gives hikers a better basis for making decisions. Training also gives them a chance to practice supporting an injured wrist with the materials available in a first-aid kit or backpack.

4 Cold-Weather Muscle Cramps

Muscle cramps are usually associated with hot-weather hiking, although they can also happen in colder temperatures. Hikers may drink less because they do not feel as thirsty; heavy clothing can hide how much they are sweating, and long climbs, fatigue, dehydration, inadequate food, and electrolyte loss can all contribute to dehydration.

A cramp can range from a painful inconvenience to a problem that makes movement extremely difficult. The hiker may need to stop, gently change position, eat, drink, warm the affected area, and give the muscle time to recover. The group may also need to determine whether the cramp is an isolated problem or part of a larger pattern involving exhaustion, inadequate hydration, or cold stress. Understanding the possible causes can help create practical corrections while the problem is still manageable.

5 Patient Assessment: What Do You Do First?

Patient assessment is the skill that connects every section of this article. When something happens, people often focus immediately on the most visible injury. Wilderness First Aid teaches a systematic process for looking at the person, the surroundings, the mechanism of injury, immediate threats, symptoms, medical history, and changes over time.

The first few minutes matter because they set the direction for everything that follows. First, remember to stay calm. Someone needs to organize the group, protect the injured person from the

environment, determine what happened, identify the most urgent problem, and decide whether the group can continue, turn around, assist the person alone, or call for help. A good assessment replaces guessing with a repeatable process.

There Is a Lot to Learn, and You Can Learn It in Two Days

There is much more to Wilderness First Aid than can fit into one article. Fortunately, an experienced instructor can teach an incredible amount in a two-day course through demonstrations, discussion, practice, and realistic scenarios.

Even after taking an impactful introductory Wilderness First Aid course, it is important to take additional classes and continue learning. Every course reinforces important skills, adds new information, and shows additional ways to approach potential problems; you can always read about first aid and carry a well-stocked kit, but hands-on instruction gives you something entirely different and more beneficial. Two days of teaching can be the difference between successfully managing an injured friend or family member and allowing a small injury to become far more serious.

If you would like more information or would like to register for our upcoming Wilderness First Aid course, [please click here](#). This course is offered by the Preventive Search and Rescue Committee of the Catskill 3500 Club, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization.

For questions, please email psar@catskill3500club.org.

WILDERNESS FIRST AID

Hosted by Catskill PSAR of the Catskill 3500 Club



Course Dates: Saturday, November 7, 2026
Sunday, November 8, 2026

Time: 9:00 AM – 5:00 PM Both Days

Location:
Catskill Forest Association
42710 State Hwy 28, Arkville, NY

\$229

Includes WFA
Certification & CPR

Provided by:

