

Sleeping Mats

Essential for a good night's sleep

As stated in the sleeping bag article, you will most likely spend a third of your time on camp sleeping and therefore it is essential that you get the right sleeping equipment. A sleeping mat, although it looks fairly innocent, can mean the difference between a good night's sleep and no sleep at all.

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How Does it Work?

When you lie down in your sleeping bag, the only thing between you and the ground apart from your bag and the material of the tent is your sleeping mat. At night, the ground temperature can drop significantly. As you may remember from science classes, the easiest way for heat to transmit between two bodies is conduction. This means that you need a good insulator in between you and the ground. This is what the mat does.

The secondary role of the mat is also to separate you and your bag from any damp that may be on the floor of the tent.

Air or Foam?

Remember - It doesn't matter how good your bag is if you don't have a sleeping mat.

The main decision that anyone usually makes is whether the mat is a simple foam type or inflatable:

Foam - This isn't anything special, simply a roll-up foam mat. The main difference between them is a season rating. This works in the same way sleeping bag ratings. The greater the rating the warmer you are, but this normally corresponds to the thickness of the mat and hence the weight. The thicker the mat, the comfier it normally is.

Foam mats are the cheapest option and are adequate for most purposes.

Features to look out for with foam mats include non-slip outers, wavy surfaces to reduce pressure points.

Remember - make sure you store a self-inflating mat with the valve open.

Self Inflating Mats - These are fairly new and have become very popular with serious campers. They work by opening up a valve and a closed cell foam soaks up air automatically inflating itself. These are much warmer, comfier and can pack down smaller than the standard foam mats but are more expensive, heavier and need more care.

With these mats, there are once again season ratings and trade-offs between comfort and insulation with weight. Looks out for R-values - the higher the value, the greater the insulation.

Features of these mats are very similar to those of the foam ones. They usually come with a sack for storage whilst walking.

Lilos & Air Beds - An Embarrassment

Remember - make sure your mat is not smaller than the size of you or your sleeping bag.

We never recommend that Scouts should use a lilo. Yes they give a comfy nights sleep but there are far too many drawbacks:

- They are heavy and cumbersome.
- They take a long time to set up.
- They often don't fit very well into tents.
- They take up too much space.
- They easily develop punctures.
- You'll get a lot of flack from other scouts and leaders!

Season Ratings

Here is a guide to what the ratings mean:

1 Season
+25C to +10C
Summer and indoor use

2 Season
+20C to +5C
Late spring or early autumn

3 Season
+10C to -5C
Early spring or late autumn

4 Season
0C to -20C
Winter

5 Season
-5C to -40C
Mountain/Expedition

Remember, we do undertake camps in the winter on occasions, but you aren't really going to have need for a 5 season unless you are planning a trip to the Himalayas or similar in the near future. We recommend that you go for around a 3 to 4 season mat.

Final Words

It is always best to get the best you can afford. Remember that the best is not necessarily the most expensive. What is ideal is what suits you and suits the conditions you are going to be sleeping in. Don't forget, when camping, you may have to carry your sleeping mat in or attached to your rucksack. You therefore are wise to look at the weight of the mat to make sure it is as light as possible.

We recommend that most Scouts would do very well with a good quality foam mat. If greater comfort is required, look at entry level self inflating mats.

As with any equipment look after it and it could serve you a long time. Many people that used to be in the troop 10 years ago are still using some of the same equipment today as they kept it in good condition.