



National  
Guidance

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## Weather and Group Safety

Experiencing different kinds of weather at all seasons of the year can be exhilarating, and provides opportunities to learn about and appreciate the cycles and forces of nature. By being prepared to cope with the weather, young people can obtain the health and other benefits of getting outdoors more often. For example, some schools ensure that children always have warm and waterproof clothing available at school, so that it is possible to conduct learning outdoors as part of normal school life without the need for prior warning.

As with many other aspects of visit safety, the planning, preparation, and vigilance of appropriately competent leaders is key.

### Weather Forecasts

The weather is an important consideration when planning an outdoor activity, but most visits will be planned long before a reliable weather forecast is available. Planning should involve consideration of how to manage the potential effects of weather, and contingency plans to deal with unacceptable weather.

Even if a visit does not involve outdoor activities, you should be aware of any potential impact of the weather on travel plans.

Weather forecasts, including specialist ones for mountain and marine environments, are readily available and generally very accurate two or three days ahead. It is important to study a forecast carefully and to interpret it for your planned visit. For example, a quick glance at a weather app may show a picture depicting sunny periods for the day. A closer look may show that there is actually a significant chance of a shower at times.

In addition to being aware of, and prepared for, the weather on the day, leaders should consider the likely effects that the weather in the days leading up to a visit will have on the ground conditions. This is particularly important if planning activities near water, as levels and flow rates will remain high for some time after rain stops. However, on all visits to the countryside it is worth having an awareness of the expected ground conditions.

Particular attention should be given to the colour coded (yellow/amber/red) warnings from the Met Office. These are issued when there is likely to be an impact from rain, thunderstorms, lightning, wind, snow, ice or fog. Details of current warnings and of how to receive alerts for specific areas are available at [www.metoffice.gov.uk/weather/warnings-and-advice/uk-warnings](http://www.metoffice.gov.uk/weather/warnings-and-advice/uk-warnings)

In addition, flood warnings are issued by the Environment Agency (for England), Natural Resources Wales, the Scottish Environment Protection Agency, and the Met Office for Northern Ireland.

If you are planning a visit overseas, or to an area without good mobile/internet communication, then part of your planning should be about how you will obtain up to date forecasts. If going overseas, you should also seek local advice about weather-related hazards such as lightning, tornadoes, and flash-flooding, which may be much more severe than in the UK.

## Cancellation and Insurance

Where a visit involves a significant financial commitment, or charges to parents, insurance should be arranged to cover cancellation, curtailment or postponement due to the weather or other factors. The establishment should ensure that it, and parents, are aware of circumstances where insurance cover may not be valid and/or refunds may not be available in the event of cancellation. For example, 'disinclination to travel' (such as when a parent decides to withdraw their child from a visit, or the establishment decides to cancel a visit owing to the weather, without evidence that it is likely to be impracticable or unsafe to travel) is often not covered.

## Weather Hazards

For much of the time, coping with the weather simply means dressing to stay comfortable: to keep dry in wet weather, warm in cold weather or cool in hot weather. However, some weather factors may quickly turn discomfort into danger, and it is important to understand these and to be prepared for them.

The effects of the weather, particularly sun, wind and cold, become more extreme at altitude, so this should be considered when planning an activity in the mountains, or when visiting an area which is at high altitude.

### Sun

Direct sunlight on the skin has important physical and psychological benefits. It is our main source of vitamin D, a lack of which is the main cause of rickets in children. It is therefore important for children to spend some time in the sun, including in the winter. However, babies and young children have very sensitive skin which burns easily and should be covered up when out in the sun.

According to the NHS, in the UK most people can make enough vitamin D from being out in the sun daily for short periods with their forearms, hands or lower legs uncovered and without sunscreen from late March or early April to the end of September, especially from 11am to 3pm. Beyond this, direct sun can have harmful effects.

To protect staff and participants from these harmful effects, you should consider the need for:

- Protective clothing;
- Hats;
- Sunglasses;
- SPF30+ sunscreen (which should be reapplied);
- Shade – in an open area you might consider taking a shelter such as a suitable gazebo.
- Water.

Adults should lead by example, by adopting sun protection themselves.

Some leaders have been concerned about whether they can apply sunscreen to children because of the potential for allergic reactions or allegations of abuse. Such concerns should never prevent a child who needs sunscreen from receiving it. Sensible practice is for leaders to carry hypoallergenic sunscreen to give to children to apply themselves but any children who cannot apply their own sunscreen should be assisted in doing so. Employer and establishment procedures should support staff in taking such sensible and appropriate action.

The NHS provides advice on sun safety at [www.nhs.uk/live-well/seasonal-health/sunscreen-and-sun-safety](http://www.nhs.uk/live-well/seasonal-health/sunscreen-and-sun-safety)

The Melanoma Fund provides a free online course on 'sunguarding' for those who work with people outdoors at [melanoma-fund.co.uk/sun-and-heat-protection-course](http://melanoma-fund.co.uk/sun-and-heat-protection-course).

## Heat

During hot weather, or when taking part in strenuous exercise, children are particularly at risk of heat exhaustion. If not treated, this can turn into heat stroke which is serious and requires emergency action. The NHS website gives a clear summary of how to recognise, prevent and treat these conditions: see [www.nhs.uk/conditions/heat-exhaustion-heatstroke](http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/heat-exhaustion-heatstroke).

## Rain

Rain can vary from a light shower to a torrential downpour. Really heavy rain can cause visibility problems, make activity difficult and be very demoralising. Getting wet in the rain is not necessarily a problem, but in temperate climates, such as the UK, getting wet often also means getting cold and this is a bad combination.

## Cold and Wet

If someone becomes cold and/or wet, they can become at risk of hypothermia. Again, the NHS website gives a clear summary of how to recognise, prevent and treat this: see [www.nhs.uk/conditions/hypothermia](http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/hypothermia).

Water activities and activities in caves, mountains, moorland, and other exposed areas can put participants particularly at risk of hypothermia. Leaders of these activities should be specifically trained in the prevention, recognition and treatment of hypothermia. The relevant national governing body awards or outdoor first aid qualifications normally include this.

In winter conditions, there is also the risk of frostnip or frostbite. Whilst this may be most likely to occur during specialist adventure activities, it can also occur during more mundane activities: for example, if a child is wearing wellington boots with thin socks in the snow. NHS guidance is at [www.nhs.uk/conditions/frostbite](http://www.nhs.uk/conditions/frostbite).

## Snow and Ice

In addition to the cold, snow and ice can pose many different hazards, including:

- Making walking difficult and tiring;
- Slipping on a road or footpath, or while skating;
- Making driving difficult and dangerous;
- Avalanches, and snow slides from roofs;
- Falling icicles from roofs or overhanging cliffs;
- Falling through thin ice on a pond, lake or river;
- Collapsing ice on a river or reservoir when water drains from underneath.

These hazards can be constantly changing and pose serious risks in terrain that is otherwise familiar and benign. When there is snow or ice around, you should be vigilant and constantly exercise dynamic risk assessment and management.

Improvised activities such as sledging or skating on a frozen pond can be worthwhile and tempting, but can pose serious risks. The risks involved should always be fully assessed before deciding whether to proceed with the activity,

If you are planning to take a group out into snow or ice conditions for activities such as winter hill-walking, skiing or skating, you should ensure that you have undertaken appropriate training and are fully competent to assess and manage the risks involved, that you have consulted relevant weather and avalanche forecasts and conditions reports, and that the participants have the appropriate clothing and equipment (such as ice axes, crampons or spikes, helmets, avalanche transceivers, probes and shovels) and know how to use it.

## Wind

Wind can cause a number of issues for leaders to manage, for example:

- Wind can be a significant contributory factor in developing hypothermia;
- A group can become exhausted or frightened when walking in a strong wind;
- A strong or gusty wind can be a danger when in woodland or near water, cliffs or other hazards;
- In very strong winds, flying debris can be a hazard.

If you plan to use a piece of woodland regularly, an assessment of the risks should include a judgement about when the wood should not be used as well as steps to be taken after there have been high winds. The Visit Leader should understand what to look out for when checking or using woodland. This may be supported by knowledge of how the landowner manages the woodland to reduce the risks to visitors.

When outdoors in cold windy weather, sometimes a forest or other woodland is a good place to be, as it provides shelter. However, this must be balanced against the risk of falling branches or trees. This risk varies greatly depending upon the

strength and direction of the wind and the nature of the woodland. Some establishments set a blanket limit for the use of all woodland: Beaufort Force 6 (a constant wind of at least 25 miles per hour) is commonly used, but a safe limit may be higher or lower than this. Visit leaders should use their instincts and if it feels unsafe in the trees – leave.

## Fog

Being out in the countryside in mist or fog can add to the experience. However, it can also increase the risks. Driving in fog can be dangerous and should be avoided if possible. Navigation in mountain and moorland areas can become difficult. Mist and fog can be cold and as wetting as rain over a period of time.

Some places, especially mountains, moorland and coastal areas, are prone to fog even in otherwise good weather and this should be anticipated if planning a visit to those areas.

## Lightning

In the UK, the risk of being hit by lightning is generally very low. However, if the forecast shows a significant risk of lightning, you should review your plans so as to avoid being in an exposed place. The following guidance is based on advice from the Met Office and the Ramblers' Association.

If you are outdoors and hear thunder or see lightning, or your hair stands on end, seek shelter inside a completely enclosed building or a hard-topped all-metal vehicle even if the sky is blue. Lightning can strike up to 10 miles away from any rainfall. Follow the 30 seconds – 30 minutes rule: if the time between when you see the flash and hear the thunder is 30 seconds or less, the lightning is close enough to hit you; after the last flash of lightning, wait 30 minutes before leaving your shelter.

If you cannot get to shelter:

- Avoid being the tallest point in the area, or being under it;
- Stay twice as far away from tall objects, such as trees, poles, wires and fences, as they are tall;
- If on an exposed hill or ridge, quickly move to a lower area;
- Don't shelter in a tent, or an open-sided building such as a shed or picnic shelter which does not have wiring or plumbing;
- Don't shelter in a shallow cave or rock shelter;
- Abandon exposed pointed metal items like fishing rods and walking poles.
- If there is no shelter, keep moving;
- If you are in the open:
  - Squat close to the ground, with hands on knees and with head tucked between them;
  - Stay on your toes so as to touch as little of the ground as possible – don't lie down;
  - Keep your heels together as it will allow electricity to go up one foot, through the heels and back into the ground through the other;
  - Do this immediately if you feel your hair stand on end.

- If you are in a boat and cannot get ashore to shelter, avoid being the tallest point by moving near a shore where there are trees, but remain twice as far away from the trees as they are tall;
- Avoid standing in water, even if wearing rubber boots (they offer no protection);
- If in a group move several yards away from each other.

It is safe to touch someone who has been struck by lightning and provide them with first aid.

