

Safer Camping Equipment

by J. Camphill

Camping equipment is often useful for people with MCS and electrical sensitivities. It may be the only alternative to sleeping in the car when traveling, visiting family or far away doctors; while working on a house, or during periods of homelessness.

Tents

The function of a tent is to keep rain, dew, wind and bugs off the sleeper, and provide some privacy. In cool weather, it is actually perceptually warmer inside a tent, especially if there is wind.

Tents come in many qualities, sizes and prices. You generally get what you pay for. Stay away from the cheap thirty dollar tents from Wal-Mart. They will not stay dry during rain showers and winds can knock them over or outright rip them to shreds. It takes a lot of effort to detox a tent, so it had better last for a long time.

For a single person, a "two person tent" gives room for keeping some gear inside, while a "three person tent" is a good choice for two people. The larger family-sized tents are harder to set up and take up a lot of room in the trunk of a car. They also tend to be less sturdy in high winds.

There are many brands available. A large brand name is Eureka!, of which I have owned three. They are a cost-effective choice, though they are not as well built as they were a decade ago. Some camping stores won't sell them any longer for that reason.

I have had good luck with tents from The North Face. They cost more, but hold up better against sunlight and would be my choice for a comfortable sleep on a stormy night. I bought one together with a Eureka! model, and the North Face was the first one I could sleep in.

The problem for people with MCS is that almost all tents are made of plastic (nylon) and treated with a heavy chemical cocktail of flame retardants, plasticizers, UV-stabilizers and mildewcides (pesticide). The tent bottom is particularly heavily treated, to make it last.

I have tried to wash them many times, as well as soak them in vinegar, 2% milk, baking soda and lime juice, but that didn't seem to help much. Hanging it up under the rafters in

the garage for a couple of years seems to be the best method. One does need to turn it inside out every six months or so, so air can come to both sides of the material.

It is possible to do it somewhat faster, perhaps in six months, by aggressively exposing the tent to the sun. Remember, it is the tent bottom that needs exposure. The upper part is more fragile and more likely to be destroyed by the sun's UV rays. Make sure to keep the fly on all the time.

The tent may shrink from sitting in the hot sun all day. I've had to cut a couple inches off each of the tent rods on some tents to make them fit. One tent got so much sun the upper part became very brittle and easily tore.

A tent will always stink when sitting in the sun. That will never go away. But it will become more tolerable at night, especially cool nights. Leaving the topsail off on dry summer nights will improve ventilation.

Embarking on a multiyear offgassing project may not seem worth it, but a safe tent can be a boon when needed.

It is possible to get a tent custom made from untreated nylon. I know one woman who did, though it cost her \$800. Seattle Fabrics (see vendor list) sells untreated ripstop nylon for parachutes and tents.

An alternative to the nylon tent is the canvas tent. These are used by the military and historic enthusiasts. Canvas tents cost more, are heavy and bulky and often require two people to set up. Most models are "wall tents", where people can stand up inside, though there are a few other models available, such as teepees. Two sources are Sheridan Tent and Awning, and Denver Tent Company (see vendor list). Both these companies also sell tents made of untreated cotton canvas. The canvas does have an odor to it, and the tents are too bulky to run through a washing machine. Without mildewcides, the canvas will soon get moldy in rainy weather. Even in the desert they do get moldy over time. One woman lived in one in southeastern Arizona, and it was quite moldy within a year. Covering it with a tarp will help delay the inevitable.

While nylon tents are completely sealed off so not even an ant can in, canvas tents are more open. Sleeping on a cot is a good idea.

Good tent care includes never folding it up while it is moist — or at least allow it to dry out later that same day. Don't let it sit in the hot summer sun all day long, either. Always use a ground cloth to protect the tent floor against twigs and stones on the ground. An offgassed plastic tarp is probably the best, as a cotton blanket would not give much protection and tend to get soggy.

In rocky or sandy soil, eight-inch nails may work better than the puny tent pegs provided with the tent. With care, a tent should last at least ten years, with moderate use.

Alternative Shelters

Many EIs sleep in their car, but it is rarely comfortable and not a good long-term solution. Eventually, the poor sleeping position may cause back problems, etc.

Some EIs have slept well for years in the back of a covered pickup truck. Used fiberglass caps may work well; some local shops may make metal ones.

A small, all-steel cargo trailer may work as well.

For long-term use, it can work well to sleep under a porch or awning. Putting up wind breakers can improve things tremendously. These can be set up as wood fences, canvas tarps or by stacking up concrete blocks. If using concrete blocks, make sure to have a solid foundation so they do not topple. Also, a stacked concrete block wall is much more stable if it is V-shaped or L-shaped.

Some people have put up a small sleeping shed made of steel, using the kits available from building supply stores. The walls could be insulated with Reflectix or Astro Foil from a building supply store. There may be oil residue left on the metal from the fabrication. It can be washed off with Bon Ami or dish liquid in warm water.

Sleeping Bags

Sleeping bags are usually made of nylon or polyester, with a few made with highly treated cotton. The fill is either down or some synthetic material, usually made of polyester. Since a sleeping bag is right in your face all night, it is important it be very tolerable. That can be a challenge. I've bought a "cotton" bag from Coleman. It's still toxic after extensive airing out, and is too bulky to fit in a washing machine. Most manufacturers discourage washings, as it makes the insulation lump together and lose its insulation value.

Using normal bedding is a good way to go, but is bulky for travel and may not work for very cold nights. The light-fitting "mummy bag" is the most efficient bedding.

Some people have had good luck with bags from LL Bean. The best sleeping bag I know is made by Wiggy's in Colorado. The insulation is a proprietary material, made from polyester, and then coated in silicone. It is surprisingly inert — I know several EIs who use them happily, even after just a few washings. I've used one myself on hundreds of

nights. (The company told a friend that they once sold their insulation to an EI who insulated a sleeping shed with it.) This bag doesn't work for everyone, though. Unlike most other sleeping bags, Wiggy's encourages their customers to wash their bag regularly. There is also a lifetime guarantee. The owner is quite a character and very proud of his products.

Sleeping bags are temperature-rated. These ratings are always optimistic, especially for EIs, who tend to have low body temperature. A bag rated for 20 degrees F is a common choice. Most people should be comfortable in it down to about forty degrees, perhaps to frost. Two different models would be needed for sleeping out year round.

A Cold Weather Trick

To stay warm at night, fill a couple of one-litre glass bottles with hot water and place them between the legs. It works amazingly well. On really cold nights, see if a one-gallon bottle will fit down there, and you'll be toasty all night long. You can also try to fill out the air pockets inside the bag with sweaters, scarves, etc. A cotton sleeping bag liner can also be helpful.

Sleeping Pads

A sleeping pad both provides a softer place to sleep and insulation against the cold ground, which is very important on cool nights.

There are three types of camping pads: closed-cell, self-inflating and air mattresses. They are all smelly and will take time to offgas, if ever. Of the three, the closed-cell pads appear to offgas faster. I have two old ones that are completely inert. Air mattresses are bulky and prone to leak. Serious campers seem to prefer either the closed-cell or self-inflating kinds. Some EIs like the Thermarest brand of self-inflating mattresses.

An MCS alternative is to use several layers of cotton pads or a wool comforter-topper, such as sold by Life Kind. These get wet easily and then moldy, and they are bulky and heavy. For camping on the go, a few cotton pads are probably the most realistic, but not very comfortable.

Recently, I've discovered a unique kind of sleeping pad from Wiggy's in Colorado. It's expensive (about \$70), but made of the same material as their sleeping bags, and was fully tolerable to me after a couple of days in the sun. It is a bit bulkier than my closed-cell pads, but I'm happily using it.

Sleeping on a Cot

It is possible to sleep out in the open on a cot. Cover it with some bedding and use a good sleeping bag with a hood that can be cinched together. On cool nights, the head can be kept all the way inside, with just a small air hole above the nose. Cold nightly winds will not be much of a problem, then. But rain and flying bugs can be, unless sleeping in the dry desert.

Most of the nasty desert critters do not like to climb up. I've slept outside in Arizona on hundreds of nights and never had an unpleasant visitor in the bed — under it, yes, but not in it.

One Canadian woman covers her bed with a tarp that is attached to an umbrella over her head and tied to a chair. This portable setup allows her to choose the best spot to sleep each night.

Make sure to sleep on enough insulating material if it gets cold at night. The body will lose most of its heat downwards. A sleeping pad provides great thermal insulation and can be sandwiched between layers of cotton pads or such. A layer of plastic can serve as a wind breaker.

Folding cots are available from camping stores, military surplus outlets, Ikea, Amazon.com and catalogs. They do take up a lot of room, even when folded up. The treated canvas type of cot tends to need a lot of detoxing. Some people use the Blantex band of cots, which are all steel.

Cook Stoves

A variety of options are available for cooking. The most common type of stove uses "white gas" or "Coleman fuel", which is essentially gasoline. Don't even think about it.

Bringing along two portable hot plates, a power strip and a long extension cord works well in many situations.

For people who are too electrically sensitive, or when camping where there are no electrical outlets, a variety of gas stoves are a possibility. They burn very cleanly and most people with MCS do well with these in open air, with a little care.

A good system uses a mixture of propane and butane in little screw-on canisters. They are designed for backpackers and are very compact. These are only sold in camping stores.

Another system uses the blue "Camping Gaz" cartridges. This is an older system that cannot be unscrewed once the cartridge has been punctured for use. There may be some danger of leakage, as well.

For more long-term use, it may be most cost-effective to invest in a propane system. Small, throwaway canisters are available at Wal-Mart, Target and some supermarkets. Larger refillable tanks can be refilled at many gas stations and country stores. This is by far the cheapest method for long-term use, but a good stove costs more.

The author has done tent camping in 45 states and backpacked around the states of Appalachia before getting sick. She has owned five tents and lived in one for periods of time.

Resources

Campmor (camping catalog)
1-800-CAMPMOR
www.campmor.com

Denver Tent Company (canvas tents)
1-800-869-7044

LifeKind (organic bedding, wool pads)
333 Crown Point Circle 100
Grass Valley, CA 95945
1-800-284-4983
www.lifekind.com

Mountain Equipment Coop
130 W. Broadway
Vancouver, BC V5Y 1P3
Canada
1-888-847-0770
www.mec.ca

Sheridan Tent and Awning (canvas tents)
1-800-310-6313
www.sheridantent.com

REI (camping stores and catalog)
P.O. Box 1938
Sumner, WA 98390

1-800-426-4840
www.rei.com

Seattle Fabrics (untreated nylon)
8702 Aurora Avenue N
Seattle, WA 98103
1-866-925-0670

Wiggy's (sleeping bags and pads)
2482 Industrial Blvd.
P.O. Box 2124
Grand Junction, CO 81502
1-866-411-6465
www.wiggys.com