

Get Wild: Thin shorts and cotton T-shirt for hiking may not be comfort wear

Sports [FOLLOW SPORTS](#) | June 16, 2022

Charles Pitman
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The Summit County Rescue Group assists in an incident on Elliot's ridge in 2010.
Charles Pitman/Summit County Rescue Group

Approaching hiking season, sometimes common sense takes a back seat when thinking about hiking attire. Backcountry users often forget that weather conditions can change as rapidly in the summer as in the winter. And that 65 degree sunny day can rapidly deteriorate, until you are faced with 50 degrees, 35 mph winds and rain.

When it is 65 degrees and you are hiking hard up that mountain, you get hot and perspire. The thin gym shorts and cotton T-shirt seem like the perfect hiking attire. But where does that perspiration go? Wear

A little cooling might be a good thing as we get above tree line and the breeze cools us down. Now consider a bit of science. A temperature of 65 degrees and 15 mph wind makes it feel like about 64 degrees. With a damp cotton T-shirt, that feels pretty nice after all that exertion.

But the weather changes and suddenly a storm rolls through, a very common occurrence. The temperature might drop to 50 degrees and the wind increase to 35 mph. Now the temperature your body feels, known as wind chill, becomes 41 degrees. That wet cotton T-shirt isn't feeling all that great. You press on to the summit thinking the weather will improve — it doesn't.

People often think that hypothermia is only a winter concern. But consider that the average body temperature is around 97.5 to 98 degrees, and now your skin feels like 41 degrees, exacerbated by that wet cotton T-shirt. You start to feel really cold — desperately cold.

Will you get full on hypothermia? Not likely, as that's a very serious although relatively rare occurrence. But there are stages of hypothermia, and you could very easily sink into one of those. You are brutally cold with no way to warm up and there is a long hike out. The more you shiver the more energy you burn. Do you have sufficient food and hydration? Is your decision making ability now impaired as you deal with depleted energy stores? Are you starting to panic? Perhaps, in your haste to get off the mountain and away from the rain, you decide to take a shortcut. You think you can make it to that road way down there because you can see it, and it looks not that far away. Now you are off the trail.

The Summit Country Rescue Group routinely wraps up missions in the early or mid-afternoon at Quandary, only to see people arriving at 2 PM dressed in a cotton T-shirt, shorts and lightweight shoes, with one water bottle and rain clouds on the horizon, maybe even thunder in the distance, and saying they are heading to the summit.

In reality, it is very easy to wear a synthetic shirt, decent hiking boots, have that long shirt and pants in a small pack, along with rain gear to keep you dry. Please remember the very important energy bars and hydration.

It is a horrible thing to feel alone, lost, brutally cold and wondering if anyone will even find you. But with a little planning, a lightweight pack and some good clothes and food, you can deal with the elements and return home thinking about another nice day outside. Some minor pre-planning can make all the difference.



Charles Pitman

Charles Pitman joined the Summit County Rescue Group in 2004 and is one of 10 mission coordinators. He is also one of the team's public information officers and served on the board of directors for eight years. The rescue group, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, fielded 216 calls for assistance in 2021. The all-volunteer team of 70 members never charges a fee for rescues and relies on donations and grants for annual operations.

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