

Cleaning your sleeping bags

Remember the good old days? Camping in the backyard, setting up the tent by torchlight, dragging the family's sleeping bags out to cuddle around a make-shift fire and telling ghost stories until late... then having a "sack-race" in the sleeping bags to your tent where you collapse, only to wake in the morning to find your prankster siblings had left something cold, wet or slimy either inside your sleeping bag or on your pillow. No thought was spared to the welfare of the sleeping bags - and poor mom was left to clean and wash them - and lets face it, now that it's become our responsibility - that's no easy task! The care label on the sleeping bags is there for a purpose, and if you don't follow those rules, things can get pretty smelly, not to mention down right expensive!

Here are a few tips I've learnt:

Firstly, sleeping bags should only be washed when absolutely necessary. The materials used to make sleeping bags are specifically designed so that they don't have to be washed all the time. You'll be able to tell when it time, particularly when your teenage children no longer want to sleep in their own sweaty, soiled sleeping bags... then you will have no choice but to wash them!

While some people take their sleeping bags to the local cleaners, it's not really necessary to have them professionally cleaned unless you have a bag with 750 down fill or higher. Sleeping bags of 750 down are those designed to withstand extreme temperatures, most often used by high-climbers and hikers and understandably require special handling when being cleaned. If you do take your sleeping bags to the cleaners do not get them dry-cleaned! Dry cleaning solution is a petroleum-based solvent that will destroy your sleeping bags in the long run.

If you choose to clean your sleeping bags yourself (you are afterall, a brave person), you will have to make use of an oversized, commercial washer and drier. Believe me, it is a BIG mistake to force your bag into a regular front-loading, tumble washing machine or any washing machine with agitators as they just eat up your bag or cause all the insulation material to ball up inside, rendering your bag clean, but utterly useless.

Secondly, wash all sleeping bags in cold or warm water with a gentle detergent - some experienced campers even recommend using a mild dishwashing soap instead of laundry soap. Never use hot water to wash your sleeping bags, even if you think your bag needs sterilizing, as the extreme heat of the water could cause the material to degrade.

Finally, and perhaps the most important part of cleaning, is the drying process. All sleeping bags must be thoroughly dried. Check whether your sleeping bags are able to be dried in a tumble drier and if so, remember to adjust the setting to medium. This is really important because many sleeping bags, and particularly down-filled ones, are made from a material that will melt at higher heat levels. It is also important that you pull them out during drying to smooth them out from time to time. When washed, wet clumps of down may develop within the bag and these need to be smoothed out so that they can dry completely. Be mindful while doing this as pulling clumps apart can damage the down material. If your sleeping bags are made from synthetic hollowfibres, it is not necessary to smooth it out but it is recommended that fabric softener is added to final rinse to control static in the bag. Synthetic sleeping bags also need to be dried at a low heat, making sure that they dry completely.

It might not be the most enjoyable task, especially on the return home after a great camp out, but nothing beats snuggling down in a clean, fresh sleeping bag on the first night of your next adventure.