

How to Build a Fire

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You can build a fire fairly easily with the right materials and tools. Gather tinder, kindling, and fuel wood to start and maintain a warming fire. To keep things safe, remember to always build your fire at least 6 feet (1.8 m) away from your tent or shelter as well as low hanging trees. Take the time to put out your fire properly once you are done enjoying it.

Part 1

Gathering What You Need



1 Buy pre-cut firewood to play it safe, if possible. Pre-cut firewood is the ideal option for making a fire at home, and it is also a wise bet for starting a fire outdoors. Having ready-to-use firewood will spare you the time, effort, and uncertainty of searching for usable firewood in the woods. Pre-cut wood logs can be purchased at hardware stores, or from merchants near campsites.^[1]

If you are visiting a national park and campground, find out beforehand **if they prohibit the use of outside firewood** and sell their own pre-cut logs on site, or **if they forbid the gathering of firewood on their land**.



2 Use manufactured fire logs for a purely decorative fire. Manufactured logs combine sawdust and paraffin wax for an easy-to-light, clean-burning fire. These logs have the benefit of lighting without any starting material and leaving little mess, but they do not create the same heat as a regular, wood-burning fire would.^[2]

- To make an easy fire when you are not in need of warmth, purchase manufactured logs at hardware stores.



3 Find small, dry materials to use as tinder for a natural fire. Tinder is easy-to-light materials that help to start your fire. Find small, dry items such as grass, leaves, shredded tree bark or newspaper are ideal choices. In a pinch, tortilla chips make great tinder if you are willing to spare the snack.^[3]

Tip: Some stores sell pre-made tinder. you can also [make your own tinder](#) ahead of time.



4 Find dry, medium-sized items to serve as kindling. Kindling is material that burns easily when it comes in contact with lit tinder, but is difficult to light its own. Look for small sticks, twigs, and large pieces of bark. Make sure that the items are completely dry.^[4]

- Cut large pieces of wood with an axe or knife to create kindling.



5 Collect a variety of fuel wood. Fuel wood should consist of logs that will burn for an extended time and keep your fire alive. Look for dry, brittle wood in a range of different sizes to top off your fire as needed as it burns. Different types of wood burn differently, so keep in mind that:^[5]

- Hardwood, like oak and maple, will take longer to start burning but burn for a long time.
- Softwood, like pine and cedar, burns fast and crack and pops while burning due to resins.



1 Build a fire on a clear, dry surface. Choose a spot that is at least 6 feet (1.8 m) away from trees, bushes, and low hanging branches. Clear the area of dry leaves, twigs, or other items that could ignite and cause the fire to spread. Make sure the fire spot is on dry ground, or build a bed of rocks.^[6]

- Build a circle of large rocks measuring about 3 feet (0.91 m) or 4 feet (1.2 m) in diameter to mark where you are building the fire.
- Never build a fire anywhere within 6 feet (1.8 m) of your shelter or tent if you are sleeping outdoors.



2 Build a cross fire structure to keep things simple. Place the tinder material at the center of your fire bed. Next, place kindling on top of it in a crisscross pattern. Repeat the pattern with the fuelwood.^[7]

Tip: Be sure to leave gaps between the burnable materials when you stack them to allow for airflow so that oxygen can feed your fire.



3 Make a teepee structure for an easy-to-light option. Bunch your tinder material into a ball that is approximately 4 inches (10 cm) in diameter. Stack pieces of kindling together in a teepee-like shape around the tinder, with an opening on one side. Lean pieces of fuelwood against each other to form a frame around the tinder and kindling, leaving a gap in the same spot that you did for the kindling.^[8]

Note: This is an alternative to building a cross fire structure. Don't do both!



4 Set up a "log cabin" fire structure for easy building. Place tinder material in the middle of your fire site, then build a tinder "teepee" around the tinder material. Place two pieces of fuel wood on either side of the teepee, then lay two more pieces across them, perpendicularly.^[9]

- Repeat the pattern 2 to 3 times to build a "log cabin."
- Again, this is an alternative to a cross fire or teepee structure.



1 Use a lighter or matches, if you have them. The simplest way to light your fire is by using simple fire starters like matches or a lighter. Carefully light matches or strike your lighter and hold the flame to piece of tinder until it starts to burn. ^[10]

- Gently blow on the lit tinder to help build the fire.
- For the best results, light the tinder from several sides to ensure that it burns properly.



2 Spark a fire with flint and steel, as a weather-proof alternative. Flint and steel sets are an excellent, lasting, and weather-proof alternative to lighters and matches. Hold the steel and flint close to the tinder pile at the center of your fire bed. Strike the steel against the flint several times to send sparks towards the tinder until it ignites. ^[11]

- Flint and steel sets are available at hardware stores, sports stores, wilderness supply stores, or online.



3 Create a fire plough for a makeshift fire starter. Dig a groove into a flat piece of softwood with a pocket knife or another sharp tool. Using a stick or small branch, plough up and down the groove to create friction and heat. After a few minutes, the heat will intensify and ignite the wood particles created by the ploughing motion.^[12]

- Other sharp tools that you can use instead of pocket knives include pens, metal skewers, and nails.

Part 4

Extinguishing a Fire Safely



1 Start putting the fire out 20 minutes in advance. It takes a while to fully extinguish a fire and it is dangerous to abandon it before you do. Plan when you want your fire to be out to give yourself enough time to achieve this.^[13]

Tip: If you have to leave your fire site at a certain time, set an alarm on your phone for 20 minutes prior to remind you.



2 Sprinkle water over the fire site. Tilt a bucket of water over the fire and distribute drops and small splashes of water onto the embers. Do this gently and gradually. A watering can, large water bottle, or other vessel will also serve to distribute water slowly over your fire site.^[14]

Avoid dousing your fire with water, which **will ruin the fire site** if you want to use it in the near future.



3 Stir the embers with a stick or shovel while you sprinkle water. Make sure that all the embers in your fireplace get wet by turning them over as you sprinkle water on them. Use a stick or metal shovel to stir them. Be thorough and continue stirring until the fire is extinguished completely.^[15]



4 **Make sure that there is no steam, heat, or noise emerging from your fire site.** Place your hand near the base of your fire site to make sure it feels cool. If you do not feel any heat emerging from the ground, it is likely to be fully extinguished. Also check for signs of steam and listen for any hissing noises, which are signs of remaining burning embers.^[16]

- If you do not see evidence of these things, it is safe to leave your fire site.
- If you see evidence of any of these things, repeat the above steps to extinguish the fire. If you don't plan on using the fire site again, dump water over it.

Expert Advice

Keep these tips in mind when you're starting a campfire.

- **Gather enough kindling to keep your fire lit.** To keep a fire going for 24 hours, you need a pile of kindling that's the size of a Volkswagen Beetle. Then, to be safe, double that.
- **Use a variety of dry materials if you don't have enough sticks.** If you're worried about running out of kindling, use things like leaves, pine needles, and dry bark to keep the fire going until you can get more sticks.
- **Be strategic with how you feed the fire.** To maintain the size and safety of your fire, use smaller sticks when the fire is smaller, then add bigger sticks as the fire goes.

From **Britt Edelen**
Outdoor Educator



Community Q&A

Question

Are plastic substances safe to burn?



Community Answer

No. Burned plastic substances are often toxic to inhale and can cause damage and/or explosions.

Helpful 51 Not Helpful 13

Question

Why does the wood need to be stacked in a pyramid shape?



Community Answer

Flames burn upward, so when you build a pyramid, the fire will burn up the stick and be less likely to go out from lack of a fuel source.

Helpful 75 Not Helpful 23

Question

What's the easiest way to build a fire?



Community Answer

Layers. Start it with kindling, start adding twigs, then move onto a bigger structure. The classic way is a pyramid, and personally I think it to be best.

Helpful 19 Not Helpful 7

Question

How big does it have to be?



Community Answer

As big as you need it to be. Make it big enough so that it doesn't die down, but don't make it big enough to where it becomes a danger.

Helpful 50 Not Helpful 23

Question

What is an easy technique to light the fire?



Community Answer

The easiest way to start a fire is to use paper. Build your paper into a really big and full ball, then put it in the middle of your fireplace and build wood over it. Use a match or lighter to light your paper and it should ignite the wood within a few minutes.

Helpful 61 Not Helpful 33

Question

Why do I need to dig a cross ditch?



Community Answer

To allow oxygen to reach the flame and be drawn up through the fire, otherwise your fire could go out from a lack of oxygen for it to burn

Helpful 66 Not Helpful 37

Question

Why do we need fire?



Community Answer

Fire is needed to keep people warm when it's cold and to cook food. Some people just enjoy sitting around a fire, telling stories, toasting marshmallows, etc.

Helpful 55 Not Helpful 36

Question

Why do I need the rocks?



Community Answer

The rocks prevent the fire from getting out of control as they form a boundary for the fire. They are not really necessary (especially if your camp already has a metal fire ring) but are good to have.

Helpful 89 Not Helpful 55

Question

How long does it take?



Community Answer

It depends on the size of the fire. A fire similar in size to the one in the pictures above might take 5 to 10 minutes to get it burning well, assuming you already have your materials collected.

Helpful 69 Not Helpful 59

Question

How long will a fire typically last?



Community Answer

Well if you watch it and keep adding more wood, the fire will last a longer period of time, but if you don't keep an eye on the fire, it could burn out quickly. Every fire is different.

Helpful 26 Not Helpful 20

Video



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6h5JP4HWoac>



Tips

- Keep at least one bucket of water or sand nearby to put out the fire.
- Never leave a fire burning unsupervised.



Warnings

- Don't light fires indoors or in extremely dry weather conditions as you could accidentally start a conflagration. Being negligent with fire could also potentially lead to criminal charges.

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About This Article



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This article was co-authored by Britt Edelen. Britt Edelen was an active member of his local Boy Scouts troop near Athens, Georgia from ages 8 to 16. As a Scout, he went on dozens of camping trips, learned and practiced many wilderness survival skills, and spent countless hours appreciating the great outdoors. In addition, Britt worked as a counselor for several summers at an adventure camp in his hometown, which allowed him to share his passion for and knowledge of the outdoors with others. This article has been viewed 2,412,985 times.



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