# Winter Clothing for Snowshoeing and XC Skiing

## Important Concepts

1. It’s easier to stay warm than to get warm – make this your mantra
2. Layering clothing is best – Multiple layers are warmer than one thick layer as air is trapped between layers and serves as insulation.
3. Fabric type is critical. Clothing must transfer moisture away from skin, provide warmth and protect from the elements. NO COTTON!
4. Pack for changing weather and terrain conditions; pack more than you think you’ll need
5. Moisture management – stay dry inside (minimize sweating) and out (waterproof jacket and pants).
6. Wearing too much clothing can lead to increased perspiration, which can lead to discomfort, chills and even hypothermia.
7. When stopping for extended periods put on warmer clothes. Remember #1!
8. Everyone has different warmth needs – learn what yours are and defend them!
9. Don’t be lazy – change up clothing rather than be uncomfortable

## Head to Foot Clothing Suggestions

### Head Options

Head coverings are vitally important in cold weather. You can lose as much as 10% of your heat through your head. Hats are a convenient way to regulate your temperature – put it on to contain heat, take it off to cool down a little.

* Lightweight knit/fleece hat
* Heavier weight knit/fleece
* Headband for ears or cap with ear flaps
* Hood on midlayer (see below) is a great option because it can be easily added and removed without losing or having to store.

### Base Layer

Base layer refers to the clothes that are against your skin, including underwear. Its function should be warmth and wicking moisture away from skin.

* Fabric weight should be on the thinner side for most outings so that layering is practical comfortable
* Fabric type should be synthetic, or wool. Wool is advantageous as it stays warm when wet
* Base layer for legs may become too hot if you are in constant motion and have an additional layer on top of them

### Mid Layer

The mid layer typically refers to what you wear on your torso and is for insulation. It is worn over the base layer. On a dry, non-windy, not too-cold day, this may be your outer layer as well. There are many options in materials, style, and weight/thickness. Mid layers are a good layer to warm up in, and an important layer to put on during any extended breaks.

* Fleece – **Pros:** comes in many weights, stays warm even when wet, breathes well. Comes in vests and in jackets. **Cons** – wind can easily get through if used as an outer layer, can be bulky to pack.
* Down – **Pros:** lightweight and highly packable. Comes in different warmth level (amount and quality of the feathers). Available in vests and jackets. **Cons:** loses effectiveness when damp/wet. Can get very expensive. Special cleaning required.
* Synthetics – **Pros:** similar to down. Uses water-repellent “stuffing” that is more effective than down when wet and dries faster. Available in vests and jackets. Cheaper than down. **Cons:** maybe heavier and bulkier for the same warmth factor than down. Not as resilient to stuffing into sacks repeatedly.
* Synthetic/Wool blends – a wonderful option for getting the warmth of wool, but the durability and flexibility of synthetics.

## Leg Coverings

Many options exist for leg coverings but they should provide warmth and some moisture protection. Features to consider include: belts, zip pockets (size and quantity), crotch zippers (or not), side zippers for ventilation, feel against the skin, durability.

*Warning* - pants/leggings cover the largest and hardest working muscles in your body and as such you can get very warm in them very quickly if on strenuous terrain. There is nothing worse than being overdressed on your legs and not being able to do anything about it. (Who wants to strip down to underwear in the snow to change pants?) Consider going with a lighter weight than you might think necessary and layer up on your upper body. If you insist on heavier pants, make sure they have large side zippers for ventilation.

## Outer Layer

Your outer layer is meant to protect you from elements that can quickly rob your body heat – wind and rain. This layer is sometimes referred to as waterproof/breathable shells. It includes jackets and pants.

Keep in mind that there is no such thing as truly waterproof, rather think in terms of degrees of water resistant. A truly waterproof layer would be plastic but you’d get wet from the inside.

Shells can be soft-shell (high degree of breathability, lower degree of water resistance, less expensive) or hard-shell (varying degrees of breathability, high degree of water resistance, more expensive)

Features to consider on jackets:

* Pockets that you can get into with when your pack is on (chest pocket and highly placed side pockets)
* Pit zippers – allow you to unzip to let some heat and moisture out if needed. A great way from to keep from overheating.

Features to consider on pants: consider full side zip pants. It can be hard to make yourself put on rain pants when you know you have to take off snowshoes/skis and boots. Ugh. Full zip pants are more costly but will encourage you to use them if weather conditions change and they become important to maintain body heat and keep you dry.

## Gloves

In the winter, think of your gloves as an essential safety item. If your hands are too cold to work buckles or zippers you may find yourself in a dire situation. Best practice is to carry a few pairs of various weights and to change them out if they get wet. As with all clothing, wet clothing is dangerous in the cold.

### Types and materials

Gloves provide more dexterity, but mittens, in general, provide more warmth.

While synthetic gloves/mittens are usually less bulky, wool gloves provide more warmth even when wet.

Fingerless wool gloves with a flip over finger mitt is a great option as they allow you to remove the mitt part from your fingers to eat, fiddle with clothing and work with equipment.

Consider investing in Gore-Tex overmitts. While pricy, they ensure to a large degree that your hands will stay dry. They keep out the wind too.

## Socks

Socks are a critical piece of winter equipment and like any clothing may need to be experimented with. In winter a good thick wool sock should provide adequate foot warmth in insulated boots.

If your boots are not as waterproof as you might like, consider waterproof socks such as those made by Randy Sun or Sealskinz. While pricey, they seem to hold up well and ensure your feet stay dry. If you anticipate any water crossings these are a must.

Always carry extra socks!

## Extras

* Gaiters (knee height) – these help to keep pants dry and add warmth on the lower legs. They also protect expensive pants from holes caused by sharp edges on snowshoes or microspikes.
* Neck Gaiter – a neck gaiter, such as the Buff brand, is a lightweight synthetic or wool tube to slip over your head and onto your neck. They are multi-functional.
* Balaclava mask – A balaclava mask, generally made of synthetic or wool, is essentially a knit cap and neck gaiter in one item. Can be extremely nice in very cold, windy conditions.

## Resources for Buying Clothes

You undoubtedly already know about REI and other large local retailers. If you are on a budget, don’t overlook the following:

* Used clothing stores like Goodwill. Fantastic things can be found there.
* Keep your eyes open for Mountaineers Gear Swap events. These are a great opportunity to get equipment at budget prices.
* Social media marketplaces. There are lots of them for outdoor gear (do a search for outdoor gear).
* Used outdoor gear retailers like the Olympia Gear Exchange or the Wonderland Gear Exchange in Seattle.