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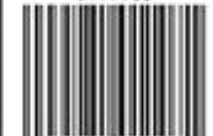
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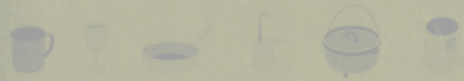
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TECHNIQUE

SKILLS

Save Your Life With a Cell Phone

Don't leave it in the car—mobile phones are the latest essential rescue gear.



Thanks to recent government regs, almost all digital cell phones automatically fix your location when you make a distress call (called E911 capability). But on a backcountry trip, ringing up a rescue isn't always automatic. Follow these tips to make sure your call gets answered.

Preparation

>> Activate your phone's automatic "location" setting, which enables the cell network to calculate your position for all phone calls, not just 911 calls. To turn this

feature on, look for the "location" option under your phone's Tools or Settings menu.

>> Preserve battery life: Keep your phone turned off (especially when you lose reception; dead zones rapidly drain the battery), but power up for five minutes each day. When turned on, cell phones "check in" with nearby towers every few minutes, leaving an electronic trail of "pings" for rescuers to follow. Phones do this even if the signal is too weak to make or receive calls.

>> Make sure your emergency contact person knows your phone number *and* your carrier, which saves precious time if rescuers need to check your last recorded transmissions and pings.

Rescue

>> To make an emergency call, improve reception by heading to the highest ground available. Hold the phone at arm's length (to keep your body from blocking any signals) and rotate around to find the strongest reception. "Return to the same place to make follow-up calls," says Bill Range, New Mexico's E911 Program Director. "Your phone will remember where the nearest tower is and find it faster."

>> If your battery is low, send a text message to your emergency contact, which requires less power and can transmit over a weaker connection than a voice call. Conserve juice by keeping your phone off between calls. Note: You cannot text 911.

>> Know what method your carrier uses to fix location. GSM phones (AT&T, T-Mobile) use radio signals to triangulate your position; climb to high ground to reach more towers. CDMA phones (Verizon, Sprint-Nextel) use internal GPS receivers; find an unobstructed view of the sky and wait a few minutes for the phone to lock on to satellites. Smartphones (BlackBerry, iPhone) combine both methods for the most accurate position.

>> When you connect with help, stay calm and double-check all your location details—such as elevation, UTM coordinates, and which side of a ridge you're on. Panicked hikers have delayed recent search efforts in Alaska and California by accidentally giving rescuers the wrong information.



EMERGENCY BLAZE

Use your cell phone to start a survival fire. Editor-in-chief Jonathan Dorn shows you how at backpacker.com/cellfire

PHOTOS BY JOSH MYERS (LEFT), JULIA VANDERKAMER (2); TEXT BY JASON STEVENSON (CELL PHONE)



VIDEOS