



Desert Safety



White Sands National Monument is a beautiful and pristine landscape. At times, however, that beauty can be deceiving, masking the potential for serious injuries that can befall the unwary. It is up to visitors to make sure they understand the nature of the environment they are entering and to be aware of hazards they may encounter.

Water & Food

The most critical factor for survival in a desert environment is access to water. Desert heat can quickly lead to dehydration. Always carry extra water with you when driving, biking, or hiking. Especially in the summer, at least one gallon of water per day is recommended. Food is important to boost both your morale and your energy. Keep emergency food, such as granola or energy bars, with you at all times.

Clothing

Dress appropriately for the weather. In the desert, it is important to wear a hat, sunglasses, and sunscreen. Carry an extra shirt or light jacket in the summer, or a heavy jacket in the winter, in case you find yourself lost in the dunes after dark when the temperature drops.

Getting Lost

It is easy to become disoriented in the dunefield. Be sure to tell someone where you are going and when you will return. Orient yourself to a landmark, such as a mountain or water tower, and carry a GPS or compass with you.

If you become lost, remain in place on top of a dune. A mirror or piece of aluminum foil can be used to flash sunlight toward potential rescuers. If possible, call 911 or the sheriff's office at (575) 437-2210 and describe your location to the dispatcher.

Heat & Cold

Exposure to excessive heat can cause heat stress, heat exhaustion, and heat stroke. Painful muscle spasms, usually in the legs and abdomen, are the first signs of heat stress.

Heat exhaustion symptoms include skin that is pale, cool, moist, or flushed, as well as headaches, nausea, dizziness, weakness, or exhaustion.

Heat stroke is an emergency condition characterized by hot, dry, red skin; unconsciousness; rapid weak pulse; and shallow breathing.

For all types of heat stress, get the victim to a cool location and give them small amounts of water or sport drink. **DO NOT** give salt tablets or salt water. Loosen tight clothing and apply cool wet cloths to the skin. Get emergency medical care as soon as possible if the victim refuses water, vomits, or loses consciousness.

Hypothermia is a dangerous drop in body temperature. Shivering, numbness, and unconsciousness are all symptoms. Getting the victim to a warm place and out of wet clothes as soon as possible is critical. Contact emergency services immediately.

Lightning

Lightning often occurs in the desert during thunderstorms, even if there is no rain. Take cover in a building or vehicle if you see a gathering storm or hear thunder. Crouch down between dunes with your feet together if you cannot get to either a car or building.

Poisonous Creatures

Rattlesnakes, scorpions, and black widows are only a few of the venomous animals found in New Mexico. To avoid a bite, watch where you walk, put your hands, or sit. Do not step over rocks or logs, and try not to walk through thick vegetation where visibility is poor. Never try to pick up, touch, or tease snakes and scorpions or handle spiders and insects. If bitten, seek immediate medical attention. Bring a photo of the animal along for identification if possible. Keep in mind that a dead rattlesnake can deliver a lethal bite.