

Lightning Safety

When lightning strikes, make sure you're out of the way.

Most of us have witnessed the awe-inspiring beauty of lightning shows: entire clouds illuminated by sudden discharges of electric current, with thunder echoing across the landscape. But while it can be beautiful, lightning is among the deadliest natural phenomena on our planet – and summer, the most popular time for hiking, is the most active time of year for storms.

Hikers are at a greater risk of lightning exposure, since nearly all lightning-related deaths occur outdoors. Each year about 300 people are struck by lightning, but only an average of 82 people per year have died from lightning strikes since 1959¹. This number has been on the decline and in the past 5 years no more than 50 have died each year².

The following guidelines should help assure that your summer hiking season is a safe and enjoyable one.

- **Prepare.** Check the weather forecast before you head outside. Be mindful of any storms in your area or conditions that are right for the development of thunderstorms. If a storm is approaching, descend from ridges, peaks, and elevated areas. In mountainous areas, thunderstorms typically develop in the early afternoon, so plan to hike early in the day and be down the mountain by noon. **If you can hear thunder, you are in danger – even if the sky near you is blue.**

- **Seeking protection.** If it's possible, seek shelter. A safe building is one that is fully enclosed and has electricity and plumbing – a home, school, office building, etc. A hard-topped vehicle is also a safe place. Partially open structures such as trail shelters, patios, open garages, tents, dugouts and sheds are not safe.

- **Safety outdoors.** If suitable shelter isn't nearby, seek protection in a valley or depression in the terrain. Always avoid isolated trees or other tall

¹ Adekoya, Nelson. *Struck-by-Lightning Deaths in the United States*. Journal of Environmental Health, 2005, pp. 45-50.

² National Weather Service. *Natural Hazard Statistics*. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, 2010. <<http://www.nws.noaa.gov/om/hazstats.shtml>>

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objects. If you have any metal – a metal-frame pack or hiking poles – make sure they're at least 100 feet away from you. People in groups should find shelter at least 100 feet away from one another.

- **Assume the position.** Crouch on the ground with your weight on the balls of the feet, your feet together, your head lowered and ears covered. Never lie flat on the ground.

These tips are not exhaustive. For more information visit www.lightningsafety.noaa.gov or http://www.lightningsafety.com/nlsi_pls/ploutdoor.htm. Before you go on your trip, make sure you have some way to keeping touch with the NOAA Emergency Weather Broadcast Radio. You can learn more about it here: <http://www.weather.gov/nwr/>.

