



AdironDoc

Backcountry Health and Hygiene

On occasion, I will use this column to review new health, safety and first aid materials designed for use in the backcountry. Our editor recently received a SAM® Splint, and we thought that this might be an opportune time to review this item, which is rapidly making its way into wilderness first aid kits.

For those who have not seen or read about it, this ingenious device is the brain-child of a California orthopedic surgeon, Dr. Sam Scheinberg. The splint, which comes in four sizes, consists of a core of highly malleable aluminum, covered with a synthetic, washable foam coating. It is durable and reusable. Since X-rays pass through the splint material, it does not even need to be removed before radiographs are taken.

The device appears so flexible at first glance that its utility for immobilizing anything seems questionable. The secret, of course, lies in physics. When a slight bend or curve is produced down the center of the splint, it immediately becomes rigid. It can then be shaped into a form for use on anything from a finger to a leg. It can even be turned into a makeshift cervical collar or a rib splint. Although it comes in different sizes, it can easily be cut for custom applications.

Although I have seen these splints in first aid kits across the country, information about them has not as yet been getting into most standard first aid texts. The instructions included with the splint are helpful, but the use of this device is somewhat difficult to appreciate from written materials. Fortunately, the company also produces a very high-quality (if somewhat corny) video, which

illustrates the use of the SAM® Splint in a variety of situations. Unless one has an experienced friend or colleague who can demonstrate the device, I would strongly recommend that anyone adding this splint to their first aid armamentarium also purchase the video.

For most applications, a single splint suffices. Major lower extremity fractures, however, require a pair of the devices for optimal immobilization. Unless the splint is to be applied long-term, no additional padding is necessary. The only other item needed to use the splint is some method of securing it in place. One of the newer elasticized adhesive tapes works well for this. These tapes are very handy items to carry in the first aid kit anyway.

As medical devices go, the SAM® Splint is pretty reasonably priced: under \$15 for the large (36") size. Since it can be cut to size, I see no compelling reason to purchase one of the three smaller versions. It comes rolled up, but can be flattened easily into a 4" by 9" by 1" shape which weighs only four ounces and packs almost anywhere. Information about local or mail-order vendors is available from the Seaberg Company, 1-800-818-4726. This may also be the only splint which has its own Web site <www.samsplint.com>!

I like the SAM® Splint, and keep one in my home and car medical kits.

I do not, however, carry one on the trail.

Why not? Like most serious backpackers, I think long and hard before adding *anything* to my gear. When I choose items to go into my pack, I look for versatility. Can a single item be used

for more than one function? For example, I like hot cereal and I like coffee. I do not, however, carry a cereal bowl and a coffee cup; I carry a mug that works for both. Most backpackers already carry an item that makes a superb makeshift splint: closed cell foam sleeping pads such as the Ridge Rest®. With imagination, scissors and duct tape (without any of which no one should ever leave home), these pads can be converted into very effective, customized splints or cervical collars. Although a Ridge Rest® can immobilize a fracture, you cannot sleep on a SAM® Splint!

Remember, too, that fractures are extraordinarily unusual hiking and camping injuries. The most common musculoskeletal mishaps in backcountry travel are sprained ankles. These injuries do not generally require splinting; they require rest, compression (with some type of elastic wrap) and elevation.

So, by all means consider a SAM® Splint for your personal first aid kit and learn how to use it. Just think carefully before deciding to add it to your trail gear. —Thomas R. Welch, M.D.



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