



## Some Useful Beta & Considerations for Women in the Mountains

*To the adventurous women joining our expeditions,*

*Kudos to you & thank you for choosing CTSS.*

*We want you to know that you make up 40% of our clientele and we're thrilled that number is rapidly increasing toward our goal of 50%. We care about your needs being met and we want you to feel welcome, heard and most importantly comfortable to raise any topic that's going to make a difference whilst you are on expedition with us.*

*We also recognize that many of you are experienced outdoorswomen already and don't need this advice but it's a good icebreaker to open the conversation and support one another. If you have something to add or some handy tips you use please reach out, we would love to include them.*

*So with that in mind, here's some female beta for you compiled by Dr Emily Johnston - Female Mountain Guide and Doctor & myself as the General Manager of CTSS - that's not often spoken about pre trip or on expedition, covering everything from peeing to periods and a few in between, for your time in the mountains...*

*Cheers  
Caroline*

Caroline Pemberton  
**General Manager**  
Climbing the Seven Summits

## Peeing 101

**Ummm do we even need to have this conversation?**

**Short Answer = Yes.**

Consider this; Sasha, one of our amazing female Lead Guide's dear friend (another female mountain guide and a very accomplished mountaineer in her own right) was climbing with a group of gents when nature called. Seeking a little dignity she excused herself and sought privacy behind the only wind roll around, which unfortunately was on a slippery ice slope. Tragically she slipped and died that day, all for the sake of privacy.

### **Beta on peeing:**

If you are at altitude, your body needs more water to make up for dryness of the air. If you are taking any altitude medications one of their side effects is more frequent urination so unless you have an elephant's bladder, you are going to need to pee on your climb. Please don't be tempted to just drink less water to avoid the need to pee. Your body is desperate for it up high and the consequences of dehydration aren't worth it. If anything, make it a priority to make sure you are drinking lots. Your urine should be pale yellow in color, not deep yellow.

Further, even if you have the world's most amazing bladder - did you know holding in your pee can increase your risk of UTIs and it also zaps your precious energy and holding it can even make you colder?

### **Ok, How Should I Pee Then?**

Firstly, shed the shame – don't be shy or embarrassed and simply speak up: tell your Guide, nature is calling and ask for a bathroom break. If the terrain is unforgiving and there's no safe opportunity for more privacy don't sweat, simply wait until you are on solid ground and then ask your team mates to kindly turn around for a few moments so you can go about your business. If you are still nervous someone might accidentally see to much, ask one of your closer team mates to hold a jacket open behind your back to create a little wall of privacy. Works a treat.

Most of our female climbers and guides swear by 'pee funnels' in moments like these, especially on steep, glaciated or challenging terrain.

### **From Dr. Emily:**

"They're great for not exposing yourself trailside, peeing in really dirty bathrooms, keeping your buns warm in snowy, windy conditions, as well as relieving yourself

without having to take off all those clothes and your climbing harness. It really saves time, and dropping trousers can be a safety issue in some environments.

I highly recommend using a pee funnel! I think the Freshette is the best, the others either aren't rigid enough, and collapse, or they have overflow problems. If you use a Freshette, I recommend putting one narrow layer of duct tape around the hose, near the end. This keeps the hose from falling backwards out of the funnel when not in use. You can clean your Freshette with bleach water, hand sani or good old soap and water. I just wish they'd get some more interesting colors/patterns"

**A note on Pee Funnels:** Practice with your pee funnel quite a bit before using it in the field. Try using it in the shower, a low-risk environment. It's not immediately comfortable for us to pee standing up, and you'll want to get the funnel placement just right. To be very specific, don't put the funnel in your vajayjay . . . that's not where urine comes out! Your urethra is inside the labia, and in front of the vaginal opening. The funnel just needs to be place over the urethra and it will direct the urine where it needs to go"

#### **From Caroline:**

**Adding to Dr. Emily's answer above – spare a thought for stage fright:** I'm not a terribly shy person but I remember needing to pee desperately on Elbrus, pulling all my layers down and feeling absolutely determined not to be embarrassed, bare butt to the wind, ready, trying but for the life of me, my bladder refused to let up. I just couldn't do it whilst I knew people in my team might look over and see me. (In retrospect they probably didn't even notice) This happened like 3 times and I ended up with all my kit rucked up under my harness, continually pulling my pants up frustrated, only to try again a few minutes later. To get over stage fright, try to relax and overcome your inability to pee by focusing on something else. A girlfriend of mine once told me she wriggles her nose to distract her thoughts! I remembered and voila, it worked) It's anxiety stopping you, and fair enough too, unlike our male friends we aren't accustomed to peeing in public but if you can distract from this anxiety you might find yourself pleasantly 'relieved'. Dr Emily swears by singing a familiar song.

#### **Pee Direction Counts:**

Sounds obvious, but make sure you pee facing downhill so it runs away from you and if it's windy try to pee so it flows in the same direction as the wind and doesn't get blown back at you. If you are squatting, perfect the height of your hover so that hard ground doesn't come back to bite you. You ladies know what I'm talking about!

#### **The Pee Rag: Yes you read that right... Yes I thought it was gross too...**

Ok so toilet paper up high in alpine environments doesn't go well, its not the type of fun

party confetti we ever want to see decorating the mountains and unlike our male counterparts, we can't just shake it off sister, (well we can to a degree but let's be honest, there's always another drip!)

You are welcome to pack out your used TP until you can dispose of it properly but this could be days (& you're likely to already have a collection accumulating from your more serious number 2 business!) even better for moments up high to stay dry, is a humble pee rag.

Stick with me here because it sounds a little gross (ok a lot gross) at first but don't knock it till you try it. Get yourself a cotton bandana, cut it in half and use it after your quick drip dry/shake to pull moisture off sensitive areas. Hang it on the back of your pack (I know, I know, but trust me, those one or two drips dry out in like 3 minutes and the sun kills odors, so no, it won't smell and no, your team mates won't care – to be honest they are unlikely to notice it) Each night at camp, if you can, rinse it out and hang to dry. Voila. I find this method waaaaay better than the rogue drips stuck against my skin with the possibility of them accumulating (& definitely smelling like pee) if I need to wear the same clothes for days on end. Can't sun sanitize your crotch as easily, now can you? You can alternate the two halves for longer drying time if yours doesn't dry overnight.

#### **At Night:**

Ahhh the pièce de résistance - a pee bottle! If you're pinned down in a snowstorm, or camping on the Lhotse Face, or in -20 in Antarctica the last thing you want to do is go out into blinding wind and snow at night to drop pants and pee. It can be seriously dangerous too. Sleep at high altitude is a valuable commodity, trying to hold it in until morning is just going to keep you awake, restless and miserable. And don't even get me started about trying to pee in your tent vestibule. Embrace the pee bottle.

Look for a wide opening nalgene, the biggest, lightest one you can find (don't risk an overflowing bottle! You'll be drinking lots of water at altitude and it's all got to go somewhere) that is robust enough to withstand being thrown in a duffel on the bag of a yak (empty by then!) There are pretty cool collapsible ones on the market these days too. Label it well. Really well. Consider adding an easily identifiable marker for yourself if you are reaching for it in the dark to differentiate it from your drinking nalgens for instance a hair elastic around it or a textured sticker on the cap.

If you have a pee funnel this will be easy, but if not you can still accomplish this task pretty simply, simply kneel and pop the opening flush with your lady parts to create a seal and.... Sweet relief... Good idea to practice this one at home a few times especially if you are going to take the risk of not getting fully out of your sleeping bag – You daring woman you!

Got company? Don't be shy, just ask your tent mate to roll away and if they are sleeping, trust me, they're not going to care or notice. You can use your sleeping bag as a privacy wall (Remember wriggle that nose or sing that song in your head) Basic etiquette, obviously be as far away from your tent mate as humanly possible. Your pee rag is useful in this instance too. Yup there it is again...

If it's cold overnight, your pee bottle will freeze, best to put it out as soon as the sun is up so it has time to melt and you can empty it before hitting the route. You can also use a good dash of boiling water to break up the ice if the weather is bad.

### **Keeping it Clean**

It sounds obvious, but women are more prone to having pee related hygiene and health issues on trips because of their short urethras. We also have the added risk of wildly uncomfortable and annoying yeast infections etc. (another reason to avoid non breathable undies) Do everything you can to keep things clean down there, wet wipes, or a wet handkerchief that you can later clean out in soap and water at the end of the day are going to be a ladies best friend.

On the hygiene note – again, sounds obvious, but be fastidious with hand washing. The number one reason people get sick in the backcountry and the mountains is a lack of pedantic hand washing. Carry a little bottle of hand sanitizer and always, always wash your hands before eating and drinking and before and after any toilet stops.

### **Periods... As Murphy's Law Says**

If (bleep) can happen, it will happen. Even if you have the most regular cycle in the world, at some point your period is going to rock up at the most inconvenient time... Which is why we titled this little letter "Menstruation in the Mountains".

#### **Dr. Emily says:**

1) Bring supplies regardless of what the calendar says!

Stress can change the timing of your cycle, so it's good to be prepared if you get surprised. Just the stress of getting ready for a trip, and travelling may change your cycle. Also, although discounted by scientific journals, I believe that menstrual synchrony is real. I've seen it happen many times in groups travelling together. This may also change the timing of your period (unless you're the alpha female!). While you can get menstrual supplies almost anywhere in the world, it's nicer to have what you're accustomed to using\*

\*(On that note to reduce environmental impact please choose non-applicator products)

2) Keep some TP/baby wipes, and hand sanitizer handy to tidy up - which you always want to do on a trek/climb anyway.

3) Keep a garbage bag handy to dispose of used fem hygiene products, baby wipes and TP. Any nontransparent plastic bag will work, but I prefer to use the more durable, reclose-able, lined coffee bags that you find near the coffee grinder at the grocery store. If they're not lined, just put some aluminum foil or a zip lock bag inside. Bring a few!

4) You got this!

If you're an adult female, you've been dealing with your periods for a long time, and it hasn't killed you yet. I've been all over the planet on rivers and mountains, in the sea and in the snow. Having a period has never stopped me from doing what I want to do, and it shouldn't stop you! Tampons and menstrual cups are often more convenient than pads in the backcountry, but can be used in conjunction with pads. Maybe try a method you haven't used before in the months leading up to a trip, so that you're familiar with it when you get on the trail or mountain.

#### **From Caroline:**

I personally like to use a menstrual cup as hippie as that sounds. It took me a little while to get used to it how to use, empty and wash in the backcountry but personally I feel so much better for it. From knowing I'm doing the right thing by the environment, to the fact I only need one no matter how long the trip, that's its cost effective and offers a significantly longer wear time (up to 12hrs) that suits most climbing schedules. Plus the avoidance of carrying used fem hygiene products around in my pack until I can dispose of them responsibly (which can be an ongoing challenge to do appropriately in the mountains or environments like Antarctica) is another plus. Yes, I know that it means you have to get pretty errrrrm up close and personal and they are not for everyone, but if you are game, here's the drill.

1. Keep your cup in a handy place, like the brain of your pack in a zip lock with some hand sanitizer. They usually come with a cute storage bag so no one will know what it is.
2. Sanitize your hands and check that the tiny air holes at the top of the cup are open.
3. Fold or roll the cup and hold it, get comfy and insert the cup rim first into your vagina while sitting, standing or squatting – whatever is most comfortable for you.
4. Give it a little adjust using the stem of the cup until it sits comfortably and has created a seal – this extra time taken will also help prevent leaks which are pretty rare in any case.
5. Wear and learn - I think if you're new to the menstrual cup movement - it's a good idea to wear a liner the first few times until you are familiar and know how

- to position it to avoid leaks.
6. When it comes time to remove and empty your cup, dig a little cat hole in the ground or snow (at least 200m from camp, water sources or trails) and sanitize your hands. Bear down (sometimes the cup will have moved higher into the vagina as you climb/trek which is normal but makes removal trickier) pull down on the stem of the cup until you can reach it easily. Pinch the cup and squeeze it for a second to break the seal, then remove the cup gently being careful not to tip it (for obvious reasons)
  7. Empty the cup into the hole with a little shake, use some water to rinse it totally clean, making sure the tiny holes are clear & either pop it back in for the next 12 hours or use the storage bag. It's a good idea to sterilize it fully by boiling it in water for a few minutes between periods. Also, while tempting please don't use hand sanitizer to help clean it, it degrades the silicon and leaves a residue you most definitely don't want up there!

### **What about using the Contraceptive Pill to skip my period altogether?**

#### **From Dr. Emily:**

To my knowledge, there is not strong enough evidence that oral contraceptives (OCPs) increase the risk of AMS, HAPE or HACE. While there are female hormones that affect respiratory drive, these hormones don't predispose one to altitude sickness, and are present in women menstruating normally and those taking oral contraceptives.

However, OCPs have been proven to significantly increase the risk of thromboembolic events such as deep vein thrombosis and stroke. Although difficult to study, it is generally accepted that being at altitude for extended periods of time also increases your risk of thromboembolism secondary to increased red blood cell mass, dehydration and reduction of total body fluid as an adaptive response to hypobaric hypoxia. As frostbite is caused by microemboli, oral contraceptives may also increase the risk and/or severity of frostbite.

My recommendation is: If a woman has been using OCPs for an extended period of time, she does not need to stop taking them when trekking for extended periods of time. But *I would strongly recommend against* starting OCPs merely to avoid having to deal with a period during a trek or expedition. There are many risks and side-effects associated with OCPs that could potentially wreak havoc on a trek or climb.

#### **From Caroline:**

To add to Dr. Emily's recommendations, it seems that there isn't a huge body of research available (yet) to show the effects of hormonal contraceptives on the body at very high altitude (those that do exist, seem to only cater for altitudes lower than

5,000m & many of our climbs and expeditions will see you well above this altitude)

There is however general medical recommendations for women on OCPS travelling above 4,500m for more than a week to exercise high degree of caution and watch out for the signs of deep vein thrombosis. Unexplained, severe pain in either calf muscle is a good warning to be aware of. Stop taking your OCPS immediately and alert your Guide to seek medical advice.

In light of all of the above, (and until there is more information from researchers) messing with your system with OCPs etc (particularly if your body is not accustomed to it) just for convenience sake, seems riskier than the inconvenience of dealing with some feminine hygiene products.

Speaking of contraception; if you are going to be intimate in the mountains, please take the same safe sex precautions as you would at sea-level.

#### **A few extra tips to dealing with Menstruation in the Mountains:**

- If you suffer bad period pain, consider packing extra ibuprofen and putting it somewhere easily accessible in your bag: Ibuprofen is an anti-inflammatory that targets and inhibits prostaglandins which are produced in high concentrations by your uterine tissue during menstruation – hence the cramps.
- Take the time to fill one of your drinking Nalgens with boiling water right before bed, pop it in a neoprene cover, throw it in your sleeping bag which will warm it up for you and double a soothing hot water bottle.
- If you prefer to use tampons and pads, make sure to pack them into a waterproof stuff sack within your luggage so stay dry and survive any sudden changes of weather.
- There is also a range of period underwear now on the market like Thinx which you may consider – These absorb up to a tampon's worth of blood but they do need to be washed out thoroughly and because of their absorbency can take quite a long time to dry. You'll also need numerous pairs adding to your pack weight.
- It's *extremely* rare, but if you do have your period and you are using tampons or menstrual cups, please alert your Guide, (or at the very least a fellow team mate you feel comfortable with) to the fact you have your period and therefore to watch out for any signs of Toxic Shock Syndrome (high fever, diarrhea, vomiting, difficulty breathing, headaches, whites of the eyes turning red) as these symptoms could also easily be mistaken for AMS (Altitude Mountain Sickness)



## Moving On To Gear

### Look for Easy to Use Drop Seats

Purchase a climbing harness with a 'drop seat' - A drop seat is pair of releasable, elastic bands extending from the rear side of the leg loops and connecting to the rear of the harness. They act like suspenders. These clips allow the leg loops to be lowered when nature calls while mid-route.

"If you're going somewhere super cold, and you'll be wearing lots of clothes, be sure that your various drop seats all work together. Give it a practice run in the backyard at night before you go" – Dr Emily

### Other critical bits: Sports Bras and Undies.

#### From Dr. Emily:

"Your sports bra and undies are right next to your skin, all day every day so choose them wisely. Don't use cotton, it will get sweaty and then just make you chilled. Beware of sports bras/undies that aren't cotton, but also don't dry very quickly. If you find yourself chilled when you stop trekking/climbing, consider changing out your undergear right away, it will help you stay warm.

If you're in super cold conditions, and aren't going to take your clothes off when you sleep, consider a sports bra with a front zipper. That way you can let the ladies relax overnight without having to wrestle out of all your clothes, and your down suit at sundown and sun up. It saves a lot of time and discomfort, and keeps you from flashing your tent mates"

#### From Caroline:

On Bras – I have always struggled with this as I have a generous bust size on a slim frame. I need extra support and normally select an underwire bra and often double up for exercise. But neither of these options work when it comes to climbing as I can't sleep in them. For my expeditions I recently found a great option from Lululemon called the Enlite bra, it caters for women of all cup sizes, is supportive, no underwire and comfy enough to sleep in. It also looks like a crop top so it's easy to change your base layers in front of tent mates without feeling exposed.

In terms of undies – I've spent years trying to find the pair of perfect expedition undies and I have finally found them: Icebreaker Siren bikini underwear. They are ultra light, soft, breathable, odor resistant and durable merino. They have low profile elastic waist

and leg openings and side seams moved forward for additional comfort. I love them so much they make for my daily underwear choice at home too. Pricy but they'll last you forever.

Another good tip is if you know you aren't able to change your underwear for a few days for instance on a big summit push - consider bringing some thin eco-friendly panty liners. You can change them out everyday without taking off all your clothes, to keep everything fresh. Make sure you dispose of them correctly. Pack it in, pack it out girl, and please chose biodegradable.

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*Did we get it all covered? Any more questions, please don't hesitate to reach out, we're happy to help and no question is ever a silly question when it comes to your health, happiness and comfort on our expeditions.*

*Best wishes,  
Caroline + Dr. Emily Johnston*

