



Your hiking boots and shoes are just like any other piece of technical gear in that they need to be given some TLC in order to keep them in good nick.

The structure, waterproof properties and condition of the leather on your shoes are all important elements to maintain so that they perform properly. Plus you paid good money for your fancy hiking boots, so there's no use trashing them!

In this article, we're going to talk you through how to clean, condition and waterproof your hiking boots or shoes so that they're always adventure-ready. We also tackle a bunch of the frequently asked questions we get about caring for your shoes, so read on for more.

What to do after each wear

Your boots are designed and made to withstand dirt, mud, rocks and water but that doesn't mean that they are indestructible.

It's really important to give them a quick wipe down after each time you wear them. This is because dirt and mud will wear down your shoes and dry them out over time, which can lead to cracked boots.

Dirt also attracts water. This makes the waterproof coating less effective making it more difficult for moisture from sweat to escape. You don't have to give them a thorough scrub, just make sure they're dirt-free before you put them in storage again.



Check your boots after each wear, and make sure you brush off any dirt or mud. Image: Alamy

Cleaning the upper of your hiking boots

If they're encrusted in mud, get your hands on a soft boot brush, or a toothbrush and use circular motions to slowly buff off any dirt that's stuck on there.

To give them a thorough clean, you may need to use a specialised outdoor footwear cleaner. This is because conventional detergents can leave behind a residue that can negatively affect the water repellency of your shoes.

Proper and regular cleaning is going to keep the waterproof treatment on your shoes performing properly. Though over time the DWR treatment will wear off and will have to be reapplied. For details on waterproofing, keep scrolling.



Use a specialised cleaning gel to give your outdoor shoes a thorough clean. Image: Nikwax

Cleaning the outsole of your hiking boots

Dirty soles can be a risk to native wildlife and plants as it's possible to track in and introduce species from one area to another from your soles.

This could end up causing damage to a delicate ecosystem or environment, which is why it's important to give your soles a scrub after each trip.



A dirty outsole won't affect performance, but be considerate of how that impacts the environment. Image: Shutterstock



Drying your hiking boots

When drying out your shoes after cleaning them, might be tempting to stick them outside on a warm day or pop them in front of the heater.

But, you should just dry them in a well-ventilated place that's out of direct heat or sunlight.

You could even put them in front of a fan if you need to speed things up.

We've had Snowys teammate ruin their leather boots by leaving them out in the sun to dry in the middle of a long-distance hike. This made them shrink, which meant hobbling the rest of the way in too-small boots. As you can imagine, this was a blistery, painful disaster – so keep your shoes away from heat!



Keep those damp shoes out of the sun when drying them.

Waterproofing your hiking boots

Hiking boots or shoes will come with a factory applied durable water repellency treatment (or DWR treatment for short) on them. During use, the exposure to sun, dirt, water and abrasions will eventually make the coating lose its effectiveness.

There isn't a strict timeframe that we would recommend for how often you need to apply a waterproof treatment to your boots. The best advice we can give you is that when you notice that water is no longer beading off of your shoes, and is soaking in instead – then it's time to waterproof them again.

You can get specialised waterproofing products for nubuck and suede, combination (synthetic and leather) and smooth leather.

It's essential to choose a product that caters to that material, as for example – using a waterproofing wax meant for smooth leather on suede will completely ruin the texture of it.



It'll be obvious that you need to waterproof your boots, as the leather will soak through and darken. Image: Keen

Conditioning your leather or suede hiking boots

Nubuck, suede and synthetic are all materials that *don't* need to be conditioned. However, if your shoes are made of smooth full-grain leather, you will need to condition them. Full grain leather can dry out which can cause cracking, and reduce the effectiveness of the waterproof coating.

Conditioning the leather on your boots will not only keep it supple and supportive, it will also top up the waterproof repellency. When conditioning, brush off any dirt that's stuck to your boots so that they're clean before you start.

It's best to follow the instructions for the conditioner that you choose as the instructions might differ across the brands. Don't condition them too frequently though as if you oversoften them, they will lose their structure and support.

If you need to break your shoes in quickly, a conditioner will also help to soften your boots up so that they're trail-ready in no time.





Leather boots need conditioning every so often to prevent cracking. Image: Desiree Stimpert

FAQ's about shoe care:

1. If my shoes have a waterproof membrane, then why do I need to keep waterproofing them?

Exposure to dirt, sun and general wear and tear will make the upper of your boots lose their water repellency. This will mean that the moisture from sweat that evaporates out of the membrane won't pass through the upper, which will eventually cause your feet to get damp. This is why you will need to revitalise the DWR coating when necessary.

2. Can I make non-waterproof shoes waterproof?

Unfortunately, you can't. In order for your shoes to reliably keep out water, they need to have a waterproof membrane, so putting a coating of waterproofer on them isn't going to protect you from rain or puddles!

3. Can I use normal waterproofing spray on my hiking boots?

The aerosol waterproofer that you get from shoe stores aren't going to cut the mustard for this. These sprays are often silicone based which will actually make your shoes less breathable. Something water based is going to be your best bet here.

4. I've just bought a pair of boots, do I need to do anything to them?

No, you don't. Your shoes should already be waterproofed, and they should already be clean and conditioned. It's only after you've worn them for a while that you need to re-waterproof, clean or condition them.

Next time you buy a new pair of trail boots or shoes, we hope that this guide helps you figure out to keep them in good condition for many future uses.

How do you keep your hiking shoes and boots in good condition? Do you have any tips? Let us know!