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A woman is in a critical condition following a bear attack at the edge of a forest in Slovenia.Local authorities have urged residents to exercise caution and avoid the area, however, it begs the question - what should you do if you encounter a bear? It's important to remember that a bear is unlikely to attack a human for its own sake and will only do so in response to a perceived threat to itself or their offspring, or if they have reason to believe you might be food.The U.S. National Park Service says understanding the bear's behaviour can be the difference between life and death.Every bear encounter is different (Getty)While every encounter is different, charges can typically be sorted into two categories: bluff and aggressive. Bluff ChargesBluff charges are more common and aim to scare or intimidate.The park service says that when a bear bluff charges, it will usually have its head and ears up and forward, it will puff itself to look bigger, and bound on its front paws toward you, moving in big leaps before stopping short or veering off to one side. So what should you do? In this situation, regardless of the bear type, you should slowly back away while waving your arms above your head, and speak in a calm voice. When the bear charges you, hold your ground and stay calm, and only when it stops should you slowly retreat.Whatever you do, don't run off during a bluff charge. Aggressive ChargesAggressive charges are cause for concern. The park service says warning signs of an aggressive charge may be when a bear yawns or clacks their teeth, pounds their front paws on the ground while huffing, has its head down and ears pointed back. Be ready to protect and defend yourself. But at this point, it's important to distinguish what kind of bear you're up against.Black bearIf a black bear charges and attacks you, your best option is to stand your ground and fight back. "Do not play dead. Direct punches and kicks at the bear's face, and use any weapon like rocks, branches, or bear spray to defend yourself," the park service suggests. But they are agile and adept at climbing trees, so no account ascend the branches to evade them. Hopefully, this will alarm the bear into a retreat.Brown bear If a grizzly or brown bear charges and attacks you, play dead. Panicking or screaming will alarm the bear and cause it to attack."Cover your head and neck with your hands and arms. Lay flat on your stomach, and spread your legs apart. Keep your pack on, it will help protect you during an attack. Stay still and don't make any noise," it said. "Fighting back during an attack from a grizzly/brown bear will usually worsen the attack, but if the attack persists, then fight back with everything you have."Polar bearsPolar bears are slightly outside the remit of the U.S. National Park Service.As polar bears are driven inland as a result of climate change melting the sea ice, encounters with the largest land carnivore on earth are increasingly likely. And while intimidation tactics might work, you won't have a lot of options. Best to avoid the scenario at all costs if you can help it. Brown bears are majestic creatures often found in various parts of North America and Eurasia. Their habitats vary from dense forests to alpine tundra and even coastal regions. Knowing how to deal with brown bears begins with understanding their behavior, which can help mitigate dangerous encounters. When you're in bear country, it's vital to recognize the signs of bear activity in your area. Look for tracks, scat, or overturned rocks and logs since bears often search for insects and small mammals under these. Spotting a fresh bear sign alerts you to exercise more caution or even to reroute your path. To reduce the risk of a bear encounter, make your presence known. Bears usually avoid humans, so speak loudly or sing, especially in dense vegetation or near running water where your noise might be muffled. Carrying bear bells is also a common practice, although some debate its effectiveness. Bear spray is a critical deterrent that can stop a bear in its tracks. Products like Counter Assault and UDA® are highly rated and have a good track record for effectiveness. Bear Spray Product Overview Counter Assault is one of the leading brands in bear deterrent spray. It can spray up to 30 feet, providing a barrier that can stop a brown bear's advance and give you time to escape to safety. Its high capsaicin content irritates the bear's eyes and respiratory system, causing intense discomfort. Counter Assault Pros Long range of up to 30 feet. Quick access glow-in-the-dark safety flare. A sufficient amount of spray duration. Counter Assault Cons More expensive than some other brands. Can be bulky to carry on long hikes. Requires careful handling to avoid self-contamination. Based on reviews from hikers and campers. Counter Assault's efficacy rates highly, often cited as a must-have item for treks in bear country. Proper food storage is another critical aspect of bear safety. Bears have an exceptional sense of smell and can be attracted to your camp from miles away if you're not careful. Using bear-proof containers or hanging your food from a tree in a bear bag are effective strategies to keep your food out of reach. When setting up camp, cook and store your food at least 100 yards away from your sleeping area. Clean up thoroughly to ensure no traces of food are left that might attract a bear. It's also wise to change into fresh clothes after cooking to reduce any lingering food odors. If you do encounter a bear, remain calm and assess the situation. Determine if the bear has noticed you and if it's displaying any signs of stress or aggression, such as huffing, stomping, or swaying its head. Awareness of wildlife behavior could be the key to safely defusing an encounter. In case a brown bear approaches, stand your ground. Speak calmly and wave your arms to make yourself look bigger. Do not run or climb a tree as bears can do both with ease. If a bear continues to approach, prepare to use your bear spray. Remove the safety, aim slightly downwards, and spray when the bear is within 30 feet. It creates a cloud barrier that the bear will run into. A bear charge is often a bluff, but always be ready with your bear spray. Stand your ground, use the spray, and most bears will turn away before making contact. Only in the rare event of physical contact should you play dead, laying on your stomach with your hands protecting the back of your neck. If a bear seems to be stalking you or if an attack seems imminent, it's time to act defensively. Use your bear spray, make noise, and attempt to find a safer location. Don't corner yourself, and try to move towards a more open area. Once a bear has left the area, wait several minutes before moving to ensure it's gone. Then, leave the area calmly and quickly, taking a route that gives you the most visibility. When camping, you want to avoid creating a bear attractant at your site. To do this, it's crucial to handle all attractants, such as food, scented items, and trash, with care. Cooking in clothes you plan to sleep in can be a mistake; instead, have a set of clothes dedicated just for cooking and eating. Picking the right spot to set up camp can make a significant difference. Choose a site with good visibility in all directions, if possible, and avoid places where bears would likely travel, such as berry patches or fresh streams. Remember that bears use certain trails and spaces as natural corridors. Brown bear encounters differ based on the situation and the bear's motivation. Some bears might be curious, while others are defensive especially if you've come close to a sow with cubs or a food source. Understanding the motivation can help you react appropriately. Surprise encounters require you to remain especially calm. Talk to the bear in a firm tone and slowly back away while ensuring the bear has a clear escape route. Avoid sudden movements that could trigger a charge. Playing dead is a last-resort defense. Lay flat on your stomach, clasp your hands over your neck, and spread your legs to make it harder for the bear to flip you over. Remain still and quiet until the bear moves away. Bears communicate through body language, vocalizations, and movements. A bear standing on its hind legs is typically trying to get a better view or scent, and isn't necessarily a sign of aggression. Direct eye contact is typically considered a challenge; avoid it to prevent escalating the situation. Before you head into bear territory, create a plan of action. Read up on bear behaviors, talk to local wildlife experts, and plan with your travel companions what you'll do if you encounter a bear. In many areas, brown bears are protected species. It's essential to be aware of the laws and guidelines in the great outdoors. Make lots of noise, make yourself appear as big as possible, and keep your ground. If you're camping, bring bear spray when you're planning to camp. Consider attending a bear safety course or seminar, particularly if you're planning to visit bear country. De-escalating a bear encounter. If you're attacked by a grizzly bear or brown bear. Fight back against attacking black bears. Ross assured, bear attacks are extremely rare. Most bears actively avoid human beings. Keep your cool and remember the bear is unlikely to attack. Most bears actively avoid humans, so you've encountered a bear, there are two potential reasons you've stumbled over by accident, or if you realize it's tracking a human. In either case, just take a deep breath and steady your nerves. Take a moment to scan the environment and get your bearings.[1] It is extremely rare for bears to track a human. It may think you're a deer or something like that, or it smells food you're carrying. Once it realizes you aren't prey, it won't attack. If you stumbled on the bear by accident, it may be as surprised as you are. Don't jump or dart away, though. That will only excite the bear further. Advertisement If you make a run for it, the bear's instinct will be to chase you. Once the bear leaves, you can back away slowly in the opposite direction. If you take off in the opposite direction though, the bear's natural desire to hunt for food may kick in and lead them to take off after you. Stand tall, don't turn your back, and fight the urge to flee.[2] Most bears can run over 30 miles per hour (48 km/h). For context, most people can run 6-8 miles per hour (9.7-12.9 km/h). In other words, you'll never outrun a bear.[3] Every bear can (and will) follow you up a tree if you climb one. As bulky and heavy as bears are, they're actually phenomenal climbers, and can climb a tree at 6-8 miles per hour (9.7-12.9 km/h).[4] You may have heard that bears can't run downhill. This is a popular myth, but there's no truth to it.[5] Jumping into water is less helpful, as bears can swim 4-5 miles per hour (6.4-8.0 km/h), which is considerably faster than humans. Sing, shout, or start chatting away to show them you're human. A bear's normal prey isn't going to make human noises, so "speaking human" will signal that you aren't food. In fact, your voice should send the bear running scared. Bears do not have any desire to be around people, so this may be all you need to do to get back to being bear-free.[6] If you happen to be holding something noisy, like a pot, bang it against the ground while you talk, sing, or shout. Advertisement The bigger you look, the bigger the bear will be too scared to attack. The bear doesn't know you are or what you're doing, the more intimidating you'll be, the more intimidated the bear will be. Advertisement If you're dealing with a bear who isn't intimidated by your antics but also isn't approaching, it may just keep looking at you (or go about its normal business). If this happens, move sideways at a slight angle (to avoid tripping) as you backpedal away from the bear. Slowly get out of eyesight and then carefully and quickly get out of the area.[12] Moving at an angle also won't accidentally give the bear the impression that you're running away, which will trigger a chase. Lie down in the fetal position to prove you won't hurt them. Brown and grizzly bears tend to only attack if they feel threatened or they're surprised. If one of these bears approach you and you're unlucky enough to not have bear spray on you, lie down, tuck your knees to your chest, and cover your head. The bear is likely going to wander off once they realize you aren't going to hurt them.[13] If you do have bear spray, continue to spray the bear as it gets close and aim for the eyes. That's always going to be a better option than playing dead. Do not get up right away—wait 2-3 minutes until you no longer hear the bear. The bear is likely to hang out for a minute to confirm that you're not going to get up and attack. Remember the phrase, "If it's brown, lie down." Advertisement Black bears won't give up if you play dead, you do not even bother. If you don't have bear spray and a black bear starts charging at you, throw rocks at it, toss your belongings at it, and shout. If they get even closer, hit them in the eyes or nose, and do your best to shock or stun the bear to send them fleeing. Playing dead just won't trick a black bear into leaving you alone, so there's no point.[14] If you do have bear spray, use that instead of trying to physically fight the bear. Black bears are like bullies. They'll often give up if you show them they're willing to fight back. You can remember to fight black bears with the motto, "If it's black, fight back." Ask a Question Advertisement Thanks Thanks Thank You More Tips Advertisement This article was co-authored by Hannah Young and by wikiHow staff writer, Eric McClure. Hannah Young is an Outdoor Education Expert with more than three years of experience. She specializes in educating others on backpacking and hiking, land ethics and best practices, and wilderness Restoration. Hannah earned a BS in Earth Systems from Stanford University. This article has been viewed 710,392 times. Co-authors: 127 Updated: February 26, 2025 Views: 710,392 Categories: Featured Articles Wilderness First Aid Print Send fan mail to authors Thanks to all authors for creating a page that has been read 710,392 times. "My friend was attacked by a bear when he was at summer camp! Although he did die, this article is a great reminder for all bears and what to do. Hopefully, there won't be more experiences like my friend's..." more Share your story Bears prefer to avoid people whenever possible, but bears are powerful wild animals and may defend themselves when surprised or feeling threatened. Learn how to avoid bear encounters and know what to do if an encounter happens (keep reading). "Know what to do when you see a bear. NEVER run from a bear. Don't approach a bear – just quietly move away and leave the area. However, if a black bear does approach you, make yourself look big, make loud noises, clap your hands, and continue to back away." — Jaime Sajecki, Black Bear Project Leader, Virginia Dept. of Game and Inland Fisheries Give the bear a clear escape route (do not corner it). Leave any doors open as you back away from the bear. Do not lock the bear in a room. From a safe distance, make loud noises, shout, or bang pots and pans together to scare away the bear. When the bear leaves, remove potential attractants such as garbage, bird seed, or pet food. Ask neighbors to remove attractants. Check your yard for bears before letting out your dog. If you see a bear before it notices you: stand still, don't approach and enjoy the moment. Then move away quietly in the opposite direction. If you encounter a bear that's aware of you: don't run; running may trigger a chase response. Approach or slowly in the opposite direction and wait for the bear to leave. Keep reading to find out what to do if a bear approaches, follows or charges you. Watch Staying Safe in Bear Country (see below) for an in-depth look at bear behavior and detailed information on how to respond to different types of interactions and encounters with both black bears and grizzly bears. Keep bear spray accessible; it's proven to be the easiest and most effective way to deter a bear that threatens you. It doesn't work like bug repellent, so never spray your tent, campsite or belongings. Learn more about bear spray. Stand your ground. Back away only when the bear stops its approach. Make yourself look bigger by raising your arms and jacket, and/or standing on a rock or stump. Yell "Hey bear" loudly. Get your bear spray out of the holster and into your hand. Remove the safety latch. Stand your ground. Try to appear large by holding up your arms and jacket, and/or standing on a rock or stump. Back away only when the bear stops its approach. Intimidate the black bear by making yourself look bigger and making noise (wave arms, shout, clap, bang stick). Stay together. Stand your ground and stay together. Intimidate the black bear by making yourself look bigger and making noise (wave arms, shout, clap, bang stick). Prepare to fight or use bear spray. Stand your ground. Remain calm. If you have bear spray, spray it directly at the bear. FIGHT BACK with anything at hand (knife, sticks, rocks, binoculars, backpack or by kicking). DO NOT play dead. This video developed by the International Association for Bear Research and Management features important information and advice from leading black bear and grizzly bear experts. See how taking basic safety precautions will help you minimize the chances of having an encounter with a bear. Learn how the circumstances and the bear's behavior are the keys to choosing how to respond if you do have an encounter with a black bear or a grizzly bear. Encountering a brown bear in the wild can be a thrilling, yet potentially dangerous experience. Knowing how to react can significantly improve your safety and the bear's well-being. The key is understanding bear behavior and employing a combination of preventative measures and calm reactions if an encounter occurs.Understanding Brown Bear BehaviorBrown bears, often referred to as grizzly bears in some regions, are powerful animals with a complex social structure and set of behaviors. They are generally not looking for a confrontation with humans, and most often, attacks are the result of a bear feeling threatened, surprised, or protective of its cubs. They are incredibly strong and possess great speed, capable of reaching up to 35 mph. Recognizing signs of agitation or stress in a bear is crucial for a safe outcome. Always direct eye contact, which can be seen as a challenge by a bear, and never turn your back or run from a bear.The Core Principles: Safe EncountersIf you encounter a brown bear, the first step is to assess the situation:Distance: If the bear is at a distance, slowly back away, making sure not to turn your back.Bear's Behavior: Is the bear calmly foraging, or is it showing signs of agitation such as pacing, sweating, or huffing?Presence of Cubs: Be especially cautious around a female with cubs, as they are the most likely to be defensive.Based on these factors, here is your core action plan:Maintain Calm and Avoid Sudden Movements: Do not panic or make quick, erratic moves. Speak in a calm voice so the bear recognizes you as a human and not a prey item.Slowly Retreat: Back away slowly while facing the bear, never turning your back or running. Give the bear ample space to escape.Do Not Run: Running triggers a chase response in bears, and they are much faster than humans.Make Yourself Appear Large: If the bear seems agitated or is moving towards you, raise your arms above your head and move slowly. This makes you look larger and less vulnerable.If Attacked Defensively, Play Dead: If the bear makes contact and you determine it is a defensive attack (e.g., a bear surprised you, or a female with cubs), drop to the ground, lie flat on your stomach with your legs apart, cover the back of your neck with your hands, and play dead. If you have a backpack, keep it on as it can help protect your back.If the Attack is Predatory, Fight Back: A predatory attack is rare, but if the bear shows signs of stalking or attacking with intention, fight back aggressively. Use anything you have as a weapon and focus your blows on the bear's face and muzzle.Use Bear Spray If Available: If you have bear spray, deploy it when the bear is within range, typically around 25-30 feet. Aim for the bear's face and deploy it in a steady stream while slowly backing away.Always Leave the Bear an Escape Route: Ensure the bear has a path where it can easily retreat and get away from you."If it's Brown, Lie Down" - Understanding the AphorismThe popular saying "If it's black, fight back; if it's brown, lie down" is a helpful mnemonic, but it's crucial to understand why the action is different for each type of bear. The "lie down" advice for brown bears specifically refers to defensive attacks, often triggered by surprise or protective instincts. Playing dead reduces the perceived threat in this situation. However, remember to fight back during a predatory attack by any bear.Preventing Bear EncountersThe best approach to brown bear safety is prevention.Be Aware of Your Surroundings: Stay alert and be mindful of the signs of bears, such as tracks, scat, and scratch marks on trees.Make Noise: When hiking, especially in bear country, make noise so bears are alerted to your presence and are not surprised.Travel in Groups: Groups are generally less likely to be attacked than individuals.Store Food Properly: When camping, store food in bear-resistant containers or hang it from a tree away from your campsite.Avoid Hiking Alone: When possible, try not to hike alone to increase your safety.Keep a Clean Campsite: Never leave food scraps or trash out, as this can attract bears to your campsite.Avoid Bears during Dawn and Dusk: Be extra cautious during dawn and dusk since bears are most active during these hours.Stay on Marked Trails: This will help avoid any surprises and keep you in the public eye.Bear Spray: Your Essential ToolBear spray is a highly effective tool for deterring bears. It is not the same as regular pepper spray; it contains a higher concentration of capsaicin and is designed to reach bears with a greater spray distance. It's important to know how to use it effectively, carry it in an accessible location (not in your backpack), and make sure it is within its expiration date. Be sure that you are always following the manufactures guidelines.Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs). Should I run if a brown bear approaches me?No, never run from a bear. Running triggers a chase response, and bears can outrun humans easily. Always back away slowly, while facing the bear.2. Is it true that brown bears are more dangerous than black bears?While both bear species can be dangerous, brown bears are generally more powerful and unpredictable. However, the circumstances of the encounter and a bear's behavior ultimately dictate the degree of danger.3. What if a brown bear charges at me?If a bear charges, hold your ground, and never turn your back or run from a bear.4. How do I know if a brown bear is approaching?Pay attention to the bear's behavior. Signs include yawning, making loud noises such as yelling, using air horns, or whistling to help deter a bear. Combine it with other actions such as looking big, while backing away to the bear.5. Can I make my own bear spray?Avoid it if you have bear spray.6. What if I see a bear?7. Should I leave my dog off-leash in bear country?Keep your dog on a leash and under your control in bear country. An off-leash dog can provoke a bear and lead it back to you.8. If I see cubs, what should I do?Never approach bear cubs. Immediately back away and give them a wide berth. The mother will be extremely protective of them, and a close encounter will be very dangerous.9. What should I do if a bear attacks me in my tent?If a bear enters your tent, you are likely in a very serious situation. If the attack appears defensive, play dead. If the bear seems predatory, then fight back aggressively. Always use bear-resistant containers to store all food to ensure it does not attract bears in the first place.10. How fast can a brown bear run?Brown bears can reach speeds of up to 35 mph, making them much faster than humans.11. What is the "bear rule" by color?The color-coded aphorism, "If it's black, fight back; if it's brown, lie down; if it's white, say goodnight" is a general guide, but understanding why each action is best for each species of bear is crucial.12. How do I use bear spray properly?Remove the safety clip and point the can towards the bear's face. Push the trigger and spray a cloud between you and the bear at a distance of around 25-30 feet.13. Will a brown bear leave me alone if I don't seem to be a threat?In general, yes, bears will leave you alone if they do not perceive you as a threat to them or their cubs. However, it's essential to be cautious, as their behavior can be unpredictable.14. What are the odds of being attacked by a brown bear?The chances of being injured by a bear are very low, approximately 1 in 2.1 million, according to the National Park Service. You are far more likely to be harmed by other causes than a bear.15. Can I hug a brown bear?Never hug or attempt to hug a wild bear. They are wild animals and can be unpredictable.16. How do I know if a bear is approaching?Pay attention to the bear's behavior. Signs include yawning, making loud noises such as yelling, using air horns, or whistling to help deter a bear. Combine it with other actions such as looking big, while backing away to the bear.17. How do I know if a bear is approaching?Pay attention to the bear's behavior. Signs include yawning, making loud noises such as yelling, using air horns, or whistling to help deter a bear. Combine it with other actions such as looking big, while backing away to the bear.18. How do I know if a bear is approaching?Pay attention to the bear's behavior. 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