

# Survival Myths

As a wilderness survival enthusiast I have come upon many questionable survival tips and half truths presented as fact. Unfortunately there is a great deal of survival related advice that does not actually work, or works poorly, when attempted in actual field conditions. Either the information is downright incorrect or there are vital pieces missing that put a successful outcome doubtful at best, and very dangerous at worst.

Many who relate their survival skills to others are more of the arm chair variety than real life doers. From the safety of ones home survival misinformation may seem harmless and few are the wiser. All too often these bad survival skills are merely passed on from one armchair enthusiast to another and over the years take on a mythical standing, so much so that most people consider them as facts.



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Even some of the most well known survival books and manuals are rife with bad survival information that the writers have obviously never tried for themselves but rather just rehashed from other survival books and manuals. Exchanging untrue ideas and bad information in this circular way does a great disservice to the public who may very well find themselves depending upon it in order to survive.

The problem is that bad survival information can turn ugly when someone tries it either experimentally or in an actual survival situation. Take for example a kid testing out something he read in a book, or someone in dire straights due to lack of water in the southwest.

One survival myth in particular that nearly everyone has heard is what I call the "cactus water myth". As the story goes, if you are thirsty in a desert all you need to do is lop the top off a cactus to find plenty of sweet water to drink. The common association with this myth is that a cactus must be something like a spiny watermelon with plenty of cool refreshing water just waiting to be tapped into. Nothing could be further from the truth.

Surviving on water from a cactus is generally a very bad idea. First of all, the amount of water you are likely to obtain from a cactus is minimal - its inside is tough and fibrous. Indeed, it is possible to obtain some moisture from the inside of a cactus but it is not pure water. Often cactus water is slimy and highly acidic. The survival fact is that drinking cactus juice like this may only lead to further dehydration.

But it gets worse. Should you be unlucky enough to obtain and drink plenty of cactus juice you are likely to be further dehydrated by intense vomiting and diarrhea. Cactus juice may burn your mouth, throat, and the lining all the way into your intestines. So much for a cool refreshing drink.

As David Alloway, a well known desert survival expert states: “What about cacti and water? Different species of barrel cacti (mostly in the genera Ferocactus and Echinocactus) are often touted as virtual reservoirs of potable water. Some cacti do contain large amounts of potable water, while others have some harsh chemicals along with it. Some cacti can cause vomiting or diarrhea, both of which are disastrous to someone already dehydrated. Even if the cactus is not especially toxic, your body may not be familiar with its chemistry, which can also bring about vomiting and/or diarrhea in an effort to purge the system. I usually encourage people to try different plants before an emergency, but not so in the case of the barrel cactus. A mature plant may be over two hundred years old, and cutting the top off and mashing the pulp kills it only for the sake of experimentation. I have read that replacing the cap on the cactus will help it heal and survive. The whole point of this article, however, is not to believe everything you read. In dire straits it may be called for to try to extract water from barrel cacti, but be aware of the possible consequences.”

The bottom line is that reading survival books and chatting on survival forums is not enough. You need to go out and practice survival skills in real life before the need arises during an actual emergency. Take everything you hear with a grain of salt and do your research. It may very well save your life!