



Hit the slopes without them hitting you back

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For many, the arrival of old man winter translates into shorter days, colder temperatures and hazardous road conditions. But for some, the winter months are a welcomed change from summer as it is time to dust off the skis or snowboard, dig out the winter clothes and head to the hills for some fun in the snow.

While many skiers and snowboarders get excited at the fall of the first snow flake, they fail to remember their skis and snowboards weren't the only things that gathered dust over the summer months. The muscles needed to meet the physical demands of skiing are often not used with summer activities and are in need of preparation as much, if not more than, ski equipment.

Tim White, executive director for the National Ski Patrol said skiing and snowboarding can be as safe and fun as any high-adrenaline sport, but it does require physical skills that must be practiced and prepared for to mitigate the risks involved.

"Skiing and snowboarding are inviting because of the challenge and the excitement of being outdoors, atop a mountain," said White. "However, there is an average of 39 trauma-related deaths and approximately 46 serious injuries reported each year so the sport is not without risk."

White said that most common mistake skiers and snowboarders make is failing to adequately prepare their bodies for the vigorous demands of skiing. He said most of the deaths and injuries are due to collisions that frequently happen late in the day and fatigue is often a prime reason.

"By the end of the day, skiers and snowboarders are generally worn out and adding to their fatigue are the deteriorated trail conditions," added White. "The snow surfaces change from all the use and the light at that time of the day makes it difficult to see the bumps in the snow. Skiers and snowboarders are simply too tired to make the proper adjustments."

White added that skiers and snowboarders should start exercising and stretching at least a month in advance of their first trip to the slopes and should start slow once there.

However, preparing to meet the physical demands of skiing and snowboarding isn't the only advice White offers, he said skiing in control is very important.

"Many accidents are from skiers and snowboarders failing to control their speeds," said White. "There are numerous fixed objects on the trails, including other people, and skiers must think well ahead to avoid hitting something or someone."

White also recommended wearing helmet but stresses it won't fully reduce head injuries in skiing faster than 12-14 mph.

"The key is to wear the helmet and then ski like you don't have one on your head," said White.

In addition to the using helmets, the National Ski Areas Association developed the “Your Responsibility Code” to help skiers and snowboarders avoid injury by encouraging courtesy to others and using common sense and personal awareness to stay safe.

If all else fails and a skier and snowboarder finds themselves in a rough situation, there is still hope on the mountain.

“The National Ski Patrol is always there to help, be it an injury, lost friend or someone who is simply too tired to make it down the hill,” White said. “Just look for the guys and gals with the white cross on their back.”

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SIDEBAR:

The Nation Ski Patrol offers these tips:

Get in shape. Don't try to ski yourself into shape. You'll enjoy skiing more if you're physically fit.

Obtain proper equipment. Be sure to have your ski or snowboard bindings adjusted correctly at a local ski shop. You can rent good ski or snowboarding equipment at resorts.

Wear a helmet. Wearing protective headgear while skiing or snowboarding only makes good sense.

Take a lesson. Like anything, you'll improve the most when you receive some guidance. The best way to become a good skier or snowboarder is to take a lesson from a qualified instructor.

Drink plenty of water. Be careful not to become dehydrated.

Curb alcohol consumption. Skiing and snowboarding do not mix well with alcohol or drugs.

Dress in layers. Layering allows you to accommodate your body's constantly changing temperature. For example, dress in polypropylene underwear (top and bottoms) which feels good next to the skin, dries quickly, absorbs sweat and keeps you warm. Wear a turtleneck, sweater and jacket.

Be prepared. Bring a headband or hat with you to the slopes, 60 percent of heat-loss is through the head. Wear gloves or mittens (mittens are usually better for those susceptible to cold hands).

Wear sun protection. The sun reflects off the snow and is stronger than you think, even on cloudy days.

Always wear eye protection. Have sunglasses and goggles with you. Skiing and snowboarding are a lot more fun when you can see.

Know your limits. Learn to ski and snowboard smoothly, and in control. Do not ski trails above your skill level. Stop before you become fatigued.

Ski with a buddy. It's always safer to ski with a friend so he can watch out for you and vice versa. Prearrange a meeting place in case you get separated and use walkie-talkies to stay in touch.

Follow the rules. Do not go off-trail. Obey posted trail closure and other warning signs. They are there for a reason. Remember that skiers who are in front of you, and below you, on the trail have the right-of-way.



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