

READY ...OR NOT?



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'Tis the season to be injured

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Cooler temperatures have blanketed much of the country, leading millions of Americans to head to the great outdoors for their favorite cold-weather recreational activities. Before these winter warriors strap on their skis or snowboards, health and safety experts urge they properly prepare for the hazards the season brings.

According to the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission, more than 310,000 people were treated at hospitals, doctors' offices and emergency rooms for winter sports-related injuries in 2012. Skiing and snowboarding, with about 120,000 and 98,000 injuries, respectively, were the winter sports activities most likely to cause harm, followed by ice skating and sledding.

Common winter sports injuries include sprains, strains, dislocations and fractures, said Dr. A. Herbert Alexander, an orthopaedic surgeon and spokesperson for the American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons.

"Often, these injuries occur at the end of the day, as people try to get in one more ski, sled or snowboard run, despite fatigue or discomfort," Alexander said. "Fortunately, most winter sports injuries can be prevented if participants stay in good physical condition, gradually increase their level of difficulty, stay alert and stop when they are tired or feel pain. Don't forget to wear helmets while skiing, snowboarding or sledding and remember to stay well-hydrated and use sunscreen."

For those who prefer motorized sporting activities, snowmobiling may be an attractive option. Today's snowmobiles are faster and more powerful than ever before, allowing riders to push their machine's limits along tree-lined trails and snow-packed fields.

However, as the sport continues to grow in popularity, so, too, do reports of snowmobile-related accidents and injuries. Mayo Clinic statistics show snowmobile-related injuries have tripled over the past 15 years.

Excessive speed, often combined with rider inexperience or alcohol, is the leading factor in most snowmobile accidents, said Dr. Mark D. Sawyer, a trauma surgeon at Mayo Clinic in Rochester, Minnesota.

"These days, recreational snowmobiles are nearly as fast as racing sleds, achieving speeds close to 90 mph," Sawyer said. "But races take place on pre-defined, groomed courses, whereas recreational snowmobiling occurs in woods and open fields with a lot of hidden hazards. Frankly, the speeds recreational vehicles can reach just aren't appropriate for open-field riding."

Many snowmobiling injuries can be minimized or even prevented through proper training, wearing appropriate riding gear and protective equipment, and using common sense, said Lt. Col. Joseph Harvey, director, Driving Directorate, U.S. Army Combat Readiness Center, Fort Rucker, Alabama.

"Before climbing onto a snowmobile, take a safety course to familiarize yourself with the machine and its capabilities," Harvey said. "Most importantly, make sure you wear your protective equipment. A helmet could save your life if you're involved in an accident or thrown from the snowmobile."

Harvey also noted that because alcohol is a contributing factor in many winter sports-related accidents, it has no place on the slopes.

“Alcohol can impair your judgment and slow your reaction time,” he added. “It can also cause your body temperature to drop at an accelerated rate, which increases the risk of hypothermia. If you choose to have a drink, just make sure it’s after you’ve finished riding or skiing for the day.”

For more information on winter safety, visit <https://safety.army.mil>.