



Hit the slopes without them hitting you back

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As fall and winter approach, fun in the sun for some is replaced by fun in the snow as skiers and snowboarders dust off their equipment to hit the slopes.

With the fun comes some risk, however. According to the most recent data available from the National Ski Areas Association, there were 39 skiing and snowboarding fatalities in 2008-2009.

While many skiers and snowboarders get excited at the fall of the first snowflake, 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 often aren't used during summer activities and are in need of preparation as much, if not more so, 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 they require physical skills that must be practiced and prepared for to mitigate the risks involved. A common mistake skiers and snowboarders make is failing to adequately prepare their bodies for the rigorous demands of skiing. Most ski-related 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 deteriorated trail conditions,” added White. “The snow surfaces change from all the use and the light at that time of 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 begin exercising and stretching at least a month in advance of their first trip to the slopes and should start slowly 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 helmets, but stressed they won't fully reduce head injuries when skiing faster than 12-14 mph.

Other tips from NSP include:

- People ahead have the right of way. It is each skier's responsibility to respect that rule.
- Skiers must not stop where they obstruct trails or aren't visible from above.
- Whenever starting downhill or merging onto a trail, look uphill and yield to others.
- Always use devices to help prevent runaway equipment.
- Observe all posted signs and warnings. Keep off closed trails and out of closed areas.
- Prior to using any lift, skiers must have the knowledge and ability to load, ride and unload safely.

If all else fails and skiers or snowboarders find themselves in rough situations, 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."

More information on snow sports and many other fall and winter safety topics is available online at <https://safety.army.mil> under the Fall/Winter Safety Campaign tab.

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The National 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 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 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 the body's heat loss is through the head. Wear gloves or mittens (mittens are usually better for those susceptible to cold hands).

Wear sun protection. Sunlight reflects off 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. Don't 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 or she 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. Don't go off trail. Obey posted trail closure and other warning signs; they're there for a reason. Remember that skiers who are in front of you and below you on the trail have the right of way.