

GET ACTIVE. STAY ACTIVE

Should I wear a helmet when downhill skiing?

- *Denise
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As winter fast approaches, downhill skiers in Michigan are gearing up in eager anticipation of hitting the slopes. Lately, more people are including helmets among their essential skiing equipment.

Statistics show that classic skiing injuries to the knee are becoming less frequent, while injuries to the head or face may account for 25% of alpine ski injuries. One of the more disturbing aspects of head injuries is the severity of injury. Over half of skiing related deaths are the result of head injuries, and non-fatal head injuries can result in serious neurological impairment. It is estimated that helmet use could prevent 11 skiing- and snowboarding-related deaths each year in the U.S.

So what should skiers look for when selecting a helmet? First, the helmet should be specifically designed for skiing and snowboarding. Proper fit is vital to the helmet's ability to protect during a collision. Measure the circumference of the head at the widest part to determine helmet size. The front of the helmet should sit just above the eyebrows, and the back of the helmet should not touch the back of the neck. Check for gaps—there shouldn't be any between the helmet lining and head. Next, shake your head from side to side—the helmet shouldn't move. Finally, check to make sure that goggles fit properly with the helmet on.

Injuries to the head occur most often during high-speed collisions with rocks, ice, trees, other skiers, and ski lift/snowmaker poles. Necessary precautions to avoid such collisions are the best defense against injuries. This includes knowing and heeding the skier's responsibility code, which is conveniently posted on nearly every chairlift.

Always stay in control of direction and speed

Along with beginners, advanced male skiers are at higher risk for head injuries due to their tendency to ski at high speeds.

Choose slopes which are suited to your ability level

Don't venture beyond ski area boundaries or onto closed trails.

Avoid alcohol

Alcohol can impair reflexes and decision-making abilities.

Know you limits

Know when to stop skiing for the day. Fatigue is a large factor in head injuries, with most accidents occurring later in the afternoon.

While helmet use may aid in injury prevention, it is important not to have a false sense of security when wearing one. There is simply no substitute for responsible behavior on the slopes. Be safe, be smart, and of course, have fun!

Please submit any questions you may have for our sports medicine experts by e-mailing cangelel@dmc.org. In the subject line, please write, "Get Active, Stay Active." We will respond to all the questions we receive and select one each month to feature in our column.

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