

AVOIDING COMMON SKI INJURIES

By Steven Ratcliffe, MD, Orthopedic surgeon, Overlake Hospital Medical Center

Spending time on the slopes this winter is a great way to enjoy the season and stay active outdoors. Just remember to start early in your preparation for this demanding and exhilarating sport. By ensuring your body, your equipment and the slopes are in good condition, you can help prevent injuries and make the most of your time on the mountain.

The vast majority of ski injuries I see affect the knees because it's the knees that are relied on to keep the two skis together. A few decades ago, it was ankle injuries that occurred regularly. But with new equipment and supportive boots, ankle injuries have been nearly eliminated. At the same time, the added ankle stability has resulted in transferring the force of impact from

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a fall to the nearest joint: the knee. The most common knee injury I see is a torn meniscus, the cartilage covering the knee that helps serve as a kind of shock absorber. This injury is often treated with arthroscopy, a minimally invasive surgical procedure to repair the tear.

Another common knee injury is a tear in the medial collateral ligament that's on the inside of the knee. Because of the strong blood flow to this ligament, this injury can often be effectively treated with bracing and rest. A torn ACL (an-

terior cruciate ligament), however, typically requires reconstructive surgery and aggressive rehabilitation for up to six months. Though ACL surgery results are often excellent, this injury also means a significant amount time away from sports and other activities.

Head and neck injuries are also common ski injuries. Knowing your abilities and your limits is just as important as wearing a helmet and can help you protect yourself from colliding with trees, rocks or other people on the mountain.

Another important tip for ski safety is to start each day on the slopes with some warm-up skiing, slowly and gradually preparing your body for longer and more challenging runs. While this is common advice for many sports, people often overlook this commonsense advice when skiing and head straight to the top of the mountain.

If you do have an injury, it's important to know when to see your provider for treatment. In some cases, it's obvious, such as when an injury requires a toboggan ride down the hill. Two other signs that signal a physician follow-up is needed: If you hear a pop in your knee joint, notice significant swelling after you get home or if your knee feels at all unstable. For overuse injuries that result in soreness or light swelling, it's a good idea to rest and wait it out for a short time and then reevaluate. If soreness subsides and your knee is tracking fine and has full mobility, you can probably treat it with rest, ice, compression and elevation.

Taking advantage of winter sports like skiing and snowboarding provides great exercise and entertainment through the winter months. Just remember to plan ahead and prepare so you don't cut the season short with a serious injury.

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