

By James W. McCormick

It's my favorite time of the year again – ski season! With the huge early storm upon us and La Niña in full effect, the mountains are getting covered with huge amounts of beautiful, fluffy, white snow. If you're like me, you are probably already watching the web cams and weather reports, and getting your gear together so you're ready for opening day. With opening day almost here, it's a good time to think about some safety reminders before you hit the snow.

At MBC we have represented people who have been hurt severely in skiing and snowboarding incidents. These injuries usually come about because someone has chosen not to follow the safety rules of the ski area – typically known as the skier responsibility code. Usually, ski areas have these posted at the hill, on the lift towers and even on the back of some lift tickets. In Washington, ski safety is so important that the skier responsibility code has actually been codified into law. You can find it at RCW 79A.45.030. Here's an overview of the skier responsibility code:

1. Always stay in control, and be able to stop or avoid other people or objects.
2. People ahead of you have the right of way. It is your responsibility to avoid them.
3. You must not stop where you obstruct a trail, or are not visible from above.
4. Whenever starting downhill or merging into a trail, look uphill and yield to others.
5. Always use devices to prevent runaway equipment.
6. Observe all posted signs and warnings. Keep off closed trails and out of closed areas.
7. Prior to using any lift, you must have the knowledge and ability to load, ride and unload safely.

It's important that everyone on the hill knows and follows this code. If you have young children on the mountain, work on teaching it to them. You can make a game out of it for them and start them off learning to ski safely on the mountain.

In addition to learning the skier responsibility code, there are other things you can do to stay safe on the slopes. Take your skis and boots into a reputable shop and have your bindings checked and adjusted for your height, weight, and skier ability before the season. This will make sure they are working properly and will release if needed when you fall. Wear a helmet. I've talked about this in prior blogs, but I can't stress it enough. Put a helmet on kids and set a good example by wearing one yourself. Your head is no match for trees, rocks and lift towers. Most ski shops and ski areas rent helmets these days. If you don't want to buy one, call the rental shop before you go.

Around the lodge, watch out for falling snow. People are injured every year by snow falling off of the roofs of buildings.

For the more adventurous skiers out there, keep early season conditions in mind. Remember that rocks, stumps, logs, ditches, creeks, etc. are all just under a thin layer of snow. There can be serious hazards under what looks like a pristine layer of powder. Last year at Heavenly in Lake Tahoe I hit a huge rock in waist deep snow while skiing in the back-country there. I ended up with a severely sprained ankle that took months to heal. So, take your time, more snow is on the way and the coverage will get better later in the season. When we do get a big storm and you plan to head off the beaten path, go with a partner. Wear an avalanche locator beacon/transceiver and carry an avalanche probe, shovel, and sufficiently warm gear. Stay away from tree wells that can entrap skiers. Don't cut lines and ski into closed or out of bound areas. Finally, be aware of the snow conditions, weather forecast and degree of avalanche danger – these can all change fast. If in doubt, don't go.

Finally, to get to the mountain and back, we usually have a decent drive here in Washington. Take your time and be safe on the roads. Putting yourself, your passengers and others in danger by passing a line of cars because you are excited to get to the mountain is not a good. Those extra three minutes in the parking lot are not worth the risk. Make sure you have good tires on your car. Studded snow tires are excellent. However, neither snow tires nor four wheel drive are substitutes for slowing down and driving a safe speed for the conditions.

If you or someone you know is hurt in a skiing or snowboarding incident on the mountain or in a collision on the way up or back, contact [MBC](#) to see if there is anything that can be done.

Until the lifts start turning, do your snow dances. When the mountains open, have fun and be safe out there this season!