Tahoe Nordic Search & Rescue Team's Winter Awareness

A Guide to Winter Preparedness and Survival

We often hear about skiers, snowboarders, snowshoers, hunters, and snowmobilers lost or injured in the winter wilderness who become the victims of tragedy. Most, if not all, of these situations could have been avoided had the victims been Winter Aware.

Whether you're a downhill skier, cross-country skier, snowboarder, or other outdoor enthusiast, please read this Guide and learn how to be prepared and carry the tools for survival.

Before You Go...

Check the Weather Forecast

The internet, television, radio, and the Forest Service have weather and snow reports. Know what conditions exist where you’re going, and be aware that weather can change rapidly in the mountains. If you go into the backcountry, check the Sierra Avalanche Center for a forecast at www.sierraavalanchecenter.org or call the hotline at (530) 587-2158.

Check Your Equipment

Is everything in good repair? Examine skis and bindings for loose screws, delamination, or other problems. Items that might be included in your daypack or fanny pack are sunscreen, lip balm, sunglasses or goggles, extra gloves and socks, tools for fixing equipment, and a basic first aid kit. The first aid kit may include band-aids, aspirin, triangle bandages, tape, mole-skin, safety pins, and a Swiss Army knife. An ensolite pad is also useful, as it provides good insulation from the snow.

A Survival Kit is a Must!

Include: Water, food, two large plastic leaf bags (to be used as a poncho or emergency shelter in bad weather), waterproof matches, plastic whistle (three short blasts means help), flashlight or headlamp, container for melting snow, duct tape (for repairs, can be wrapped around the top of a ski pole), cocoa or other powdered mix, and a cell phone for emergencies.

Dress in Layers

This will keep you warm and dry. Dress for changeable weather. Bring more clothes than you think you need.

Wicking Layer: This layer should pass moisture away from your skin. Synthetic or wool undergarments give you a dry layer next to your skin for warmth. Don’t wear cotton. Cotton is cold when wet and very slow to dry.

Insulating Layer (middle layer): Polyester pile, fiberglass, wool, thinsulate, etc. are materials that will keep you warm and dry quickly. Down is a good insulator, but unprotected down will get wet quickly and is slow to dry.

Protective Layer: Keeps wind, rain, and snow out. Rain gear should be large enough to fit over all your clothes and should have a hood.

A Wool or Polarfleece Hat is a Must!

Don’t Drink Alcoholic Beverages

Alcohol impairs judgment and opens blood vessels at the extremities, allowing blood to cool. This can lower your body’s internal temperature.

Food and Nourishment

Eat before you go out and frequently during your outing to replace expended energy. Bring a lunch with a variety of long-lasting foods such as breads, bagels, jerky, nuts, peanut butter, cheese, energy bars, and dried fruit. Go easy on high sugar snacks like candy. Stopping for snack breaks lets you take the time to enjoy the winter environment, the reason you’re there in the first place.

Drink Plenty of Liquids

Bring water with you, at least two liters per person. With strenuous exercise your body can lose 4-5 liters of water daily. It is essential that this water be replaced.

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Former Utah Governor Jon M. Huntsman, Sr., has offered to help with the search.


In the Event of an Injury

1. Monitor breathing. Keep the airway open.
2. Check for heart beat. Is CPR required?
3. Check for bleeding. Usually the most effective way to stop bleeding is direct pressure on the wound and elevation above the heart.
4. Keep the victim warm and dry, out of the wind and off the snow. Treat for shock.
5. Immobilize broken or badly sprained limbs.

Hypothermia is a Deadly Condition

Hypothermia is a lowering of the core temperature of the body. It is easier to prevent hypothermia than it is to treat it in the field.

1. Wear proper clothing, dress in layers.
2. Stay dry. Wet clothes, especially cotton, are useless. Don’t get caught wearing jeans. Wear a wool or polarfleece hat.
3. Eat high energy foods and drink plenty of liquids.
4. Do not become overly fatigued, rest often.

The Warning Signs of Hypothermia

1. Shivering.
2. Loss of coordination and the ability to do simple tasks.
3. Disoriented or confused attitude. As one of the symptoms of hypothermia is a reduction of mental ability, you may not notice the onset in yourself. It is very important to carefully observe the others in your party.
4. Do not become overly fatigued, rest often.

If Left Untreated, Hypothermia Will Kill

TREATMENT OF HYPOTHERMIA

1. Get the victim out of the wind and elements.
2. Prevent heat loss by getting the victim in warm, dry clothes (your own if necessary) or a pre-warmed sleeping bag. Get into the bag with the victim (both unclothed). Insulate the victim from the ground.
3. Give warm liquids and sugars/carbohydrates for food.
4. Continuously assess their condition.