

Know the risk of avalanches and how to be prepared

Thousands of avalanches occur each winter in the mountains of Colorado. With the enormous popularity of winter sports in Colorado, this poses a risk to skiers, snowboarders, snowmobilers, and people traveling in the backcountry. On average 6 people die in avalanches in the state of Colorado every year. Anyone who travels into the high country in the winter should be prepared for avalanches and know how to avoid them.

The most important thing to know is how to get information on current avalanche conditions. Check the Colorado Avalanche Information Center website at <http://avalanche.state.co.us/> for the current avalanche forecast and the National Weather Service website <http://www.weather.gov> for the current weather forecast in your area. Knowing the current and future conditions will help you make good decisions in the backcountry.

A little information about avalanche safety can go a long way. Most avalanches occur during or just after snowstorms on slopes between 30 and 45 degrees. A significant snowfall may result in an unstable snowpack. By waiting at least 36 hours after a big snow or wind storm before you go into the mountains will allow for the snow to become more stable and less likely to avalanche. If you stay in valleys away from avalanche chutes, in stands of trees, or on gentle slopes you can decrease the risk of being caught in an avalanche.

If you are a skier or snowboarder at a commercial ski area, the risk from avalanches is lower than in the backcountry. Ski patrols work to reduce the chance of an avalanche on open slopes. Respect the rules of the ski area and stay on open slopes and do not stray out of bounds or into closed areas. The avalanche risk is higher outside of the ski area boundaries.

If you want to enjoy the great outdoors in areas prone to avalanches, you can reduce the danger by following a few simple rules:

Check the current avalanche forecast to get information on current and forecast avalanche conditions. Also, check the latest weather forecast to see if conditions are likely to change while you are in the backcountry.

Never travel alone. Always have one or more companions. Even small avalanches can be fatal. If you are alone and get trapped, you may not be found until spring.

If crossing a slope that may be prone to avalanches, do it one person at a time. You want to minimize the impact on your party if an avalanche is accidentally released.

In avalanche country, all members of your party should carry avalanche rescue equipment including an avalanche beacon, shovel, and probe pole. This increases your chance of a successful rescue and finding your friends alive.

Avalanche conditions in Colorado are monitored and forecasted by the Colorado Avalanche Information Center, CAIC. You can get more information on avalanches, avalanche forecasts, and avalanche safety and request a safety class from the CAIC.

Go to their website, <http://avalanche.state.co.us> or call the center at 303-499-9650.

Winter Weather Preparedness Week continues through Saturday. Now is the time to get prepared for winter so you can safely enjoy the outdoors and travel safely when the snow flies.