

# Opinion: Tips for staying out of the ER this winter

By Warren Withers

Wintertime in Tahoe means skiing and snowboarding for visitors and locals alike. Few other places on earth have the abundance of snowsports opportunities that we enjoy in the Tahoe basin.

With all the excitement and fun, we can sometimes forget the few simple measures that can help us prevent the occasional, but largely avoidable injuries.



Warren Withers

Consider the following when you're headed out to your favorite resort so that your après ski plans do not include a trip to the ER.

- **Wear a helmet.** It is interesting to see the evolution of the use of the helmet in snowsports. It is such a simple device, but it is still used and thought of perhaps the way we thought about and used seat belts in 1965: helpful, but optional. Like a seat belt, it does not protect against all forms of injury, but it will change the degree of injury you endure if you do fall and hit your head. For example, a moderate head injury without a helmet will be a minor head injury if you are wearing one. Once you start wearing it, you will never go back. They are comfortable, they keep you warm, and just like your seat belt, you will feel naked without it.

- **Use wrist guards.** These simple and inexpensive devices can be purchased at any sports shop, and like the helmet they can make the difference between a normal fall and a trip to the ER. These are especially useful for snowboarders who are just learning.

- **Understand resort boundaries and backcountry access gates.** This subject has evolved considerably in recent years. Now there are designated gates which you can go through at some resorts to access the “backcountry.” This can be an amazing experience, but it is clearly an activity left to experts who know the full risk involved. When you cross these gates, you enter unpatrolled areas, and if you are injured or become lost, rescue can take a long time to arrive and is quite expensive.

- **Avoid “no go” areas at resorts.** Resort staff are experts at identifying when an area is safe and when it is not. When they mark an area off, usually with a rope or ribbon, it is for your safety, not because the skiing or snowboarding is so great there that they want to keep you away from it. This is a simple concept, but we see these boundaries ignored and the patient often regrets this decision.

- **Prepare for avalanches.** Avalanches get a lot of attention in the press for good reason. If you intend to venture into the backcountry, you must first know what you are doing. It is imperative that you take an avalanche course and wear and know how to use a beacon. These actions will reduce, but not eliminate your risk. Avalanches inside resort boundaries are very unlikely, but just beyond that boundary line, the slopes of “steep and deep” snow call out to the powder hounds in all of us. But remember, boundaries are there for your safety.

We wish you all a safe and enjoyable winter.

*Warren Withers is the medical director of Emergency Medical Services at Barton Health.*