

Being aware and prepared for an avalanche

By Tia Rancort

With all the recent snowfall we've been experiencing and more on the way, it's a good reminder to be aware of avalanche potential and educate ourselves on proactive steps to take before going outside to recreate – whether skiing, snowboarding, snowmobiling, snowshoeing or hiking.

Proactive steps that you can take before going out include:

- Check Sierra Avalanche Center's recorded avalanche advisory at 530.587.3558, ext. 258.
- Go **online** to learn more details about avalanche safety and training classes that are available. Also, most local sports shops offer free classes and training throughout the winter.
- **Recognize warning signs:**
 - o Such as recent avalanches (if there are new avalanches, it's likely that more are possible in that area).
 - o Signs of unstable snow as you travel (cracking or collapsing snowpack, whumpfing sounds, hollow drum-like sounds on hard snow).
 - o Heavy snowfall or rain in the past 24 hours (significant snowfall or rain can make the snowpack unstable; avalanches are often triggered the first clear day after a storm; because it's sunny doesn't mean it's safe).
 - o Windblown snow (loads leeward slopes, even when it's not snowing out).

- o Significant warming or rapidly increasing temperatures (warm temps and gravity can cause the snow to creep downhill and become less stable).

- o Persistent weak layers (can be triggered weeks after a storm, they can be difficult to identify so check the Avalanche Advisory for your area)

- **Identify avalanche terrain:**

- o Slope angle (avalanches are possible on any slope steeper than 30 degrees, and occur most frequently on slopes 35 – 50 degrees).

- o Terrain traps (anything that increases the consequences of being caught in a slide such as cliffs, trees and rocks).

- o Common trigger points (under certain conditions avalanches may be triggered from flatter areas in the runout zone or along ridge crests)

- o Aspect (which way does the slope face in relation to sun, wind?).

- **Safe travel protocol:**

- o Back country travelers should carry proper gear such as a transceiver, probe, and shovel.

- o Always carry your gear on your body with your transceiver turned on.

- o Consider riding with an inflatable pack to increase your chances of staying on top of an avalanche.

- o Practice with your gear regularly. Seconds count and your gear only works when you can use it confidently and efficiently in bad conditions.

- o Carry the gear and supplies you need to survive an injury or a long evacuation in winter conditions.

- o Be able to communicate with your partners and rescuers.
- o Remember that your gear helps you have a safer and more fun day – it does not guarantee your safety.
- o Never expose more than one person to avalanche danger at a time (one on a slope at a time).
- o Stay alert to changing snow stability due to changes in aspect, elevation, or weather factors (heavy precipitation, wind or warming).
- o Communicate within your group, have options.
- o Be prepared to do a rescue.

For more information on avalanche safety, go **online**.

Remember, the best tip is to “Know Before You Go”, the avalanche danger rating is only a starting point. You control your own risk by choosing where, when and how you travel.

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