

Safety Site

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Recreational Safety takes Responsibility and Control

Spring Skiing

Spring is often considered the most dangerous time for skiing, mostly due to such changeable conditions. The snow surface can change from ice to slush in a short timeframe or, depending on which side of the mountain you are on (sunny or shady). Also, when skiing in heavy slush, a fall can more easily cause a joint injury due to the weight of the slush. Please read the following paragraphs from an expert.

What we call “corn-snow” is named because of the large, rounded-off snow crystal structure that results from an ongoing melt-freeze cycle. Warm days melt the snowpack, allowing small cold grains to merge, forming larger crystals. Clear, cold nights in the Spring re-freeze these wet, larger crystals and they become slightly more angular (like a kernel of baby corn). The longer the melt-freeze cycle continues, the larger these grains become. It may take many days of melt-freeze cycling to produce ideal corn skiing conditions. The morning following a freeze, this corn layer at the top of the snowpack is solid as a rock. However, on a sunny day, this layer can soon turn to slush, but with a window of time in between to enjoy skiing. On a cooler, cloudy day, the ice may not soften.

Check the weather forecast and plan to be on the hill for the ideal corn skiing window. Avoid skiing when conditions are solid as a rock, and avoid the late day melt-down when the slush becomes thick, heavy, and hard to navigate in. Follow the sun, skiing east-facing slopes at the start of the day, then move to south slopes, then west- and north-facing slopes later in the day. A late season snowstorm may bring some fresh powder, but don't be fooled. A small amount of powder may only create more variable conditions.

A good edge tune is recommended for the early morning firm snow surface, but the ski tune must deal with the wet snow that's to come later in the day. Wax essentially waterproofs a ski so that it glides along on small ball-bearing-like beads of water, so for wet snow a “warmer,” softer wax is the key. Base structure is the pattern of fine grooves ground into the base material (usually by a stone grinder) that serve to allow an avenue of escape for these tiny water droplets. If this water can't escape in bead form out from under the ski this water will “sheet” rather than remain beaded, and this creates suction. This is what happens when the skis lurch to a halt or slow intermittently as you ski between shade and sun in the

late spring. The amount of water in the sunny patch overloads your skis' wax and structure capacity and causes the sudden lurches as you ski.

Be sure to wear sunscreen, and don't forget your sunglasses or goggles.

*Most of the information came from R. Mark Elling, skiing expert and author of *The All-Mountain Skier: The Way to Expert Skiing*. <http://ow.ly/2vmhxj>, with permission from skiing.about.com*