

Safety

Shots

Safety is no Accident!

Avalanche Safety

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Avalanche safety gear is critical when skiing in backcountry areas or off-piste terrain, where the risk of avalanches is higher. Avalanches can occur suddenly and with little warning, making it essential to carry the right equipment to prevent and respond to such emergencies.

One of the most important pieces of avalanche safety gear is the avalanche transceiver (also known as a beacon). This device emits a signal that allows rescuers to quickly pinpoint the location of a buried skier or rider, improving the chances of a successful rescue. It's important for backcountry skiers and riders to not only carry a transceiver but also to practice using it regularly, as familiarity with the device can save valuable time during a rescue situation.

An avalanche probe is another essential tool. The probe, typically a long, collapsible pole that can be quickly assembled and thrust into the snow, is used to locate the exact position of a buried skier or rider after an avalanche has occurred. Probes are lightweight and compact, making them easy to carry in a backpack, but they can be life-saving when every second counts.

The third key piece of avalanche safety equipment is the avalanche shovel. A sturdy, lightweight shovel is necessary to dig out a skier or rider who has been buried. In the event of an avalanche, rescuers must quickly move large amounts of snow to reach the victim, and a high-quality shovel with a durable handle and a broad blade is crucial for efficient digging. Many avalanche-specific shovels are designed to be lightweight yet strong enough to handle the tough conditions of avalanche debris.

Avalanche airbags, which are becoming more popular, provide an additional layer of safety. These airbags, integrated into a skier's backpack, can be deployed during an avalanche. When inflated, they increase the skier's volume and help them stay on the surface of the snow, reducing the likelihood of burial. While they don't guarantee survival, avalanche airbags can significantly increase the chances of staying above the snow in the event of an avalanche.

Together, these avalanche safety items — along with knowledge of avalanche risks and rescue techniques — are essential for anyone venturing into backcountry terrain. Skiers and riders should always check avalanche conditions before heading out, take an avalanche safety course, and carry the necessary gear to stay prepared in case of an emergency.

Linda Johnston is a long-time skier and ski club activist and has led many group trips to ski destinations in North and South America. She raised her two sons on Arizona and Colorado ski hills. Linda is a doctor of physical therapy, practicing in orthopedics for over 40 years in Phoenix, Arizona.