

Prepare for ski trip or risk heart attack, amateur skiers told

Amateur skiers have been warned of the dangers of hitting the slopes unprepared after a study showed a spike in the number of heart attacks in the first two days of a holiday.

By [Rebecca Smith](http://www.telegraph.co.uk/journalists/rebecca-smith/) (http://www.telegraph.co.uk/journalists/rebecca-smith/), Medical Editor, in Stockholm

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A study of tourists in the Austrian Alps showed that sudden cardiac deaths accounted for 40 per cent of all deaths on the slopes.

The research, conducted by the Medical University of Innsbruck, found that half of those who suffered a heart attack had not been doing the recommended levels of exercise before they left.



A study of tourists in the Austrian Alps showed that sudden cardiac deaths accounted for 40 per cent of all deaths on the slopes. Photo: PAUL MORRISON

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They were doing less than two hours of sport per week in the run-up to their ski holiday, the researchers said.

Dr Bernhard Metzler, associate professor of cardiology at the university, said: "Every year millions of tourists visit the Tyrolean Alps to participate in a variety of winter sports, each of which carries a certain risk of accident and injury.

"Sudden cardiac death accounts for a staggering 40 per cent of the total fatalities amongst winter sports tourists in the Austrian Alps and of these acute myocardial infarction (heart attack) is the leading cause."

The team analysed data from 1,500 patients admitted to the hospital with heart symptoms between November and April in the years between 2006 and 2010. Of these 170, had suffered a heart attack.

It was found that over half of the heart attacks occurred in the first two days and within two hours of hitting the slopes.

Only one fifth of the heart attack patients had known they had a heart condition yet seven in ten had some symptoms that would put them at greater risk of heart problems.

Lead author Dr Gert Klug said: "The fact that most of the infarcts (heart attacks) happened in the very early phase of the vacation hints at a causal relationship between lack of preparation for the intense regime of physical exertion and exposure to high altitudes and low ambient temperatures.

“From previous studies it is known that each of these factors might trigger acute myocardial infarction.”

The average altitude at which a heart attack occurred was 1,350m – the average height of the ski resorts at St Anton, in Austria. However most patients lived at just 170m above sea level.

The authors recommended that people planning a ski trip should prepare carefully and gradually increase their regular physical activity. Once on holiday the time spent skiing should also be increased gradually, they said.

Peter Weissberg, medical director of the British Heart Foundation said building up physical activity gradually was important before any major exercise.

“For a lot of people skiing will be the only exercise they take all year. They sit behind a desk all year and then go off and ski and its hard work.”

He said at altitude there is less oxygen in the air so less in the bloodstream which makes the heart work harder.

Combined with the cold, which makes the blood vessels constrict, creating more pressure, it adds even more workload for the heart, especially during exercise.

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