

When Should I Replace My Ski Helmet? Experts Weigh In.

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Is it time to replace your ski helmet? Learn from experts on helmet safety, when to retire old gear, and why MIPS technology might be your best choice this ski season.



Photo: Ray J. Gadd

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Last March, I skied for the very first time in Colorado. As you might imagine, shredding through Loveland's bowls, tree skiing at Breck, and exploring A-Basin's unique terrain completely spoiled my East Coast skier brain. I'm generally accustomed to carving atop Northeastern ice, and that meant I was feeling over-zealous, to say the least.

While ripping down the open bowls at Loveland, I caught an edge and took a decent fall. Nothing serious, but I knocked my head. And now that ski season is creeping up again, I'm starting to wonder: [Should I replace my ski helmet?](#)

When to Replace Your Helmet

The Micheli Center dedicates its research to sports injury prevention and estimates that about 20 percent of ski and snowboarding injuries are head injuries. Furthermore, the majority of those head injuries are due to falls, which are followed by collisions with other objects (trees, other people, or any other obstacles). Experts recommend replacing your helmet every 5-6 years to ensure maximum protection, even if it hasn't been damaged.

Of course, a helmet doesn't guarantee that your head will go unscathed. Your ski helmet is ineffective if it's ill-fitted, if your chin strap isn't fastened, or if you're wearing a thick beanie underneath. And even if you're wearing it properly, Dr. Muhammad Arshad, a neurologist at Memorial Hermann Health System in Houston, Texas, tells *SKI* that helmets are a "single-use item" for head protection.

"Any time you have a fall where you feel like the helmet protected you from a serious injury, you should replace it," he says. "If your helmet saved you from injury once, it's done its job, and it's time to retire it."

Why Helmets Degrade

But your helmet won't visibly crack every time it sustains a blow. Even if it still *looks* like it's in good condition, it may not be.

Dr. Thompson Maesaka, a Chiropractic Medicine doctor and owner of neurology rehab clinic The Neural Connection, tells us that helmets often crack internally. And you don't want to find out it's started to break down the next time you fall.

"The consequences could last for years," Maesaka explains. "If you fall and hit your head with a helmet that's already broken, it won't absorb all of the ground force — that means your head, neck, and possibly brain will absorb the rest."

Once your helmet cracks (even if it's internal!), its condition is likely to get worse. Steve Pilla, Ski Hardgoods and Helmet Buyer, and Lily Pilla, Snowboard and Accessories Buyer at Ski Haus, tell me that helmet deterioration is quite literally a "slippery slope."

"If you fell on that spot once, it's more likely that's the spot you'll hit again," they explain. "Now you don't have as much protection in that spot."

But, they add, sheer force isn't the only reason to replace your helmet. Helmets naturally break down over time, becoming less protective the longer you have them.

Top Helmet Features for Safety

Many gear experts now recommend MIPS helmets, which stand for Multi-directional Impact Protection System. MIPS reduces rotational forces during an impact, offering better protection than standard helmets and minimizing head injuries from rotational and angular impacts.

“It’s recommended that you change out your helmet every 5 to 6 years,” they say. “If your helmet is older than you can remember, let this be your sign to get to your local ski shop and replace that sucker!”

And while it’s tempting to toss your helmet into a gear closet at the end of the season, providing your helmet with additional protection may prolong its lifespan. That’s why Dr. Thompson Maesaka suggests putting it back in the box when it’s not in use.

“Avoiding any excess force into the outer portion will help preserve the functionality and ensure it can do its job when needed,” he says. “I’d look at it more like investing time and money into your brain health and not your skiing hobby.”

While your helmet may have merely sat in storage or even in its box, it still isn’t in “spankin’ new” condition. Jonathan Inaba, Buyer of Ski Hardgoods Accessories/Novelty/Outdoor at [Sun & Ski Sports](#), tells us the materials start to degrade over time, even if they go untouched.

“Helmets are generally constructed of foam and plastic,” he says. “This degrades over time even when they’re not being used.”

That said, many protective [ski and snowboard helmets](#) effectively protect your head. Many gear experts now recommend [MIPS helmets](#) for the most possible protection. MIPS, which stands for Multi-directional Impact Protection System, helps minimize head injuries from rotational and angular impacts.

“The helmets that will offer the greatest protection are those with Spherical MIPS, such as the [Giro Tor Helmet](#), and [Giro Tenaya Helmet](#),” Inaba adds. “The second would be a helmet with MIPS like the [Smith Mission MIPS](#) or [Smith Vantage MIPS](#).”

Steve and Lily Pilla add that MIPS may drive up the cost, but many major brands are starting to implement similar types of technology for less.

Actionable Tips: How to Check for Helmet Wear

“Companies are doing their own research and doing their best to recreate it without stepping on any copyright infringement lawsuits,” they explain. “Atomic’s AMID technology is a prime example of that. Both technologies work well, and both are safe.”

Atomic’s [Savor Amid](#) and [Four Amid](#) are just two examples.

And, of course, buying a new helmet is no small feat. But [Dr. Muhammad Arshad](#) says it’s crucial, like replacing any other sporting equipment.

“I sympathize with not wanting to get rid of tried and trusted equipment, especially in an expensive sport like skiing,” he says. “But there is some gear that just doesn’t hold up over time. You might be using your dad’s skis from the 70s but no one is on the slopes wearing 10 year old socks (I hope), and no one got to the mountain on 10 year old car tires.”

Fortunately, helmet culture has changed substantially over the years. Many old-school skiers have traded their beanies for helmets to protect their heads.

That said, many protective ski and snowboard helmets effectively protect your head. “Most films won’t put a pro in if they’re not wearing a helmet now, and that’s where us common folk get our inspiration,” Lily and Steve Pilla explain. If we see our favorite skier or rider wearing a helmet, we are far more likely to throw one on.

Inspect your helmet today before hitting the slopes. You can stay safe on the mountain with proper care and timely replacement and get the most out of your gear.

High Five