

# Why Skiing Is a Ridiculously Good Workout

- HEALTH
- EXERCISE & FITNESS

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The bracing air on your face and the rush of snow beneath your skis: Not many activities intuitively feel as healthful and invigorating as downhill skiing. But is it actually any good for you?

The answer, unequivocally, is “yes”—although how good skiing is for you depends in part on your skill level, how hard you push yourself and the types of terrain you tackle on the slopes.

“Alpine skiing is a mix of endurance and resistance training,” says Dr. Josef Niebauer, a professor of sports medicine and cardiology and director of the Institute for Molecular Sports and Rehabilitation Medicine at Paracelsus Medical University in Salzburg, Austria. “It has positive effects on the heart and circulation, as well as peripheral muscles—predominately the legs.”

In terms of working your heart, Niebauer’s research has shown that downhill skiing roughly equates to cycling or rowing workouts. Of course, hopping through deep powder will push your heart rate higher than a leisurely slalom down a groomed run. But he says that all types of downhill skiing (and cross-country, too) offer cardio-metabolic benefits, including improved insulin resistance, body composition and glucose metabolism, as well as a drop in blood pressure, blood lipids and heart rate. Skiing also seems to reinvigorate blood vessels and cell health. “We saw positive effects on arterial stiffness, which is a sign of rejuvenating arteries,” Niebauer says. (Arterial stiffness is also a risk factor for heart disease and Alzheimer’s.)

Skiing is also a form of interval training, which has lately become one of the hottest fads in the fitness world. After pushing yourself for anywhere from 20 seconds to 15 minutes during a run, you get a nice break as you ride back up the hill. A growing body of evidence suggests this on-off style of training—working hard for a few minutes, then taking a breather—can provide a range of benefits, from extending your life to improving your fitness levels.

But skiing really distinguishes itself from other fitness activities when it comes to firing up and training the muscles of your lower body. “The mix of highly coordinated movements with different types of exercise modes”—carving, skidding, quick turns, jumping—“and the mix of eccentric, isometric and concentric muscle work might be seen as quite unique when compared with other types of physical activity,” says Thomas Stöggl, a skiing researcher and associate professor of sports science and kinesiology at the University of Salzburg.

The subtle (and not so subtle) knee and hip movements and exertions that take place during downhill skiing challenges a much wider range of lower-body muscles than do most other forms of exercise. From the large muscles in your thighs to much smaller support muscles around your knees, skiing is a complete lower-body workout, shows a 2013 study in the *Journal of Sports Science and Medicine*.

Why is this important? Research on trail hiking and running suggests that activating and training more of these support muscles can improve balance and stability, and may cut down on your risk for overuse or repetitive-motion injuries. While the scientific literature on downhill skiing is less robust, studies show that it too improves balance and range of motion.

Last but not least for outdoor enthusiasts, the spectacular natural settings that tend to accompany skiing shouldn't be discounted. Lots of research suggests that spending time outdoors and in nature is great for your mental and physical health. And a little cold exposure could also provide fat-burning benefits.

"Being active in a beautiful outdoor environment can't be topped," Niebauer says. "Skiing is more than just a sport—it comes with lots of positive effects on the skier's wellbeing and quality of life." (If you doubt this, walk into any ski lodge and observe all the happy, rosy cheeked faces.) Research on elderly adults also shows skiing improves mood.

But while downhill skiing offers a number of health benefits, the risks can't be discounted. Take on trails or terrain that exceed your abilities, and you expose yourself to serious injury—from broken bones and concussion to death. Even if you're staying away from trees and moguls, Niebauer points out that heart attacks are the number-one cause of death on the slopes. "This is mainly due to the fact that a considerable number of skiers go skiing despite poor fitness and a mix of cardiovascular risk factors that makes them prone to cardiac events," he says.

Any activity that pushes your heart can also imperil your heart. That's true for running, cycling and swimming. And skiing is no different.

But assuming your heart is in good enough shape to handle exercise, the benefits of skiing "far outweigh" the risks, Niebauer says.



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