

LIGHTNING



The Rocky Mountains attract millions of visitors each year, and, unfortunately, some of these visitors are hit by lightning. The Lightning Data Center in Denver has accumulated data from lightning strikes in the region that give insights about those who are struck.

Lightning-related injuries in the Rockies usually affect healthy people who are engaged in recreation or sports. More than half of those who died of lightning strikes in the Rockies were visitors. Being hit above timberline is often fatal. Male victims outnumber female victims four to one. The typical casualty is a healthy man in his mid-30s. Most injuries occur in the summer months between 11:00 am and 9:00 pm. High on the list of activities are mountain hiking, climbing, camping, fishing, boating, and golfing.

Some of these injuries and deaths are preventable. Many vacationers are unaware of the measures they can take to lower their risk of being struck. They should educate themselves about lightning strikes. They should be near safe shelter and try to avoid high terrain, golf courses, and bodies of water during high lightning activity (late morning to evening).

If you are caught above the tree line when a storm approaches, descend quickly. Avoid isolated trees. It is better to run into a forest.

Electric storms can also develop in the middle of the night. To lower your odds, don't pitch your tent near the tallest trees in the vicinity.

In open areas

Hikers, golfers, and others should run into a forest if a shelter or car is not nearby. Drop metal objects like golf clubs, tennis rackets, umbrellas, and packs with internal or external metal frames.

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Get off golf carts, tractors (including lawn tractors), motorcycles, bicycles, and horses. Metal bleachers at sports events, metal fences, and utility poles are also to be avoided.

If you are caught in an open field, seek a low spot. Crouch with your feet together and head low.

Don't sit or lie down, because these positions provide much more contact with the ground, providing a wider path for lightning to follow. If you are with a group and the threat of lightning is high, spread out at least 15 feet apart to minimize the chance of everybody getting hit (see "If Someone Is Struck"). Don't return to an open area too soon. People have been struck by lightning near the end of a storm, which is still a dangerous time.

On the water

Swimmers, anglers, and boaters should get off lakes or rivers and seek shelter when storms approach. Drop any fishing rods. Boaters who cannot get off the water before the storm hits should crouch low. Once on land, get at least 100 yards away from shore.

If Someone Is Struck

People who have been hit by lightning carry no electric charge and can be safely tended to. Also, victims who appear dead can often be revived. If the person is not breathing, begin mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. But if a pulse is absent as well and you know cardiopulmonary resuscitation (CPR), begin CPR. Stay with the victim until help arrives.

Remember: This information is not intended as a substitute for medical treatment. If you have a health-related concern, consult a physician. Also, the tips discussed here may lower injury risk, but the unpredictability of lightning affords no guarantees.