

Skiencephalia – having skis on the brain

As a neurologist with an interest in skiing, I have had the opportunity to study a phenomenon that I believe merits broader attention. This phenomenon is skiencephalia – skis on the brain. I have undertaken an observational study of persons in my social circle who I believe are suffering from this syndrome, which in English is termed «ski addiction».

■ It is difficult to estimate exactly how widespread this is, although the affliction is especially prevalent in the Nordic countries. In Norway it occurs most frequently in regions with the best skiing conditions, i.e. Eastern Norway and Trøndelag. Men are stricken more frequently than women.

Causes

Hereditary as well as acquired forms exist. With regard to the hereditary forms, when a person is born with skis already attached, a quest is currently being undertaken to discover so-called «ski susceptibility genes». Such genes tend to be found primarily in families whose ancestors have left clear tracks. With regard to the acquired forms, the local environment is assumed to be the main cause.

There are some who believe that the affliction is contagious, but a ski virus has not been detected.

Manifestations

The affliction typically has its onset in childhood or adolescence, but some cases of late onset have also been observed. Different degrees of seriousness can be found, but they all cause skiing to assume a dominant position in the sufferer's life. A «skier's high» is perceived as the ultimate state of happiness. This is a euphoric, almost ecstatic condition that tends to require a firm track and blue-wax temperatures.

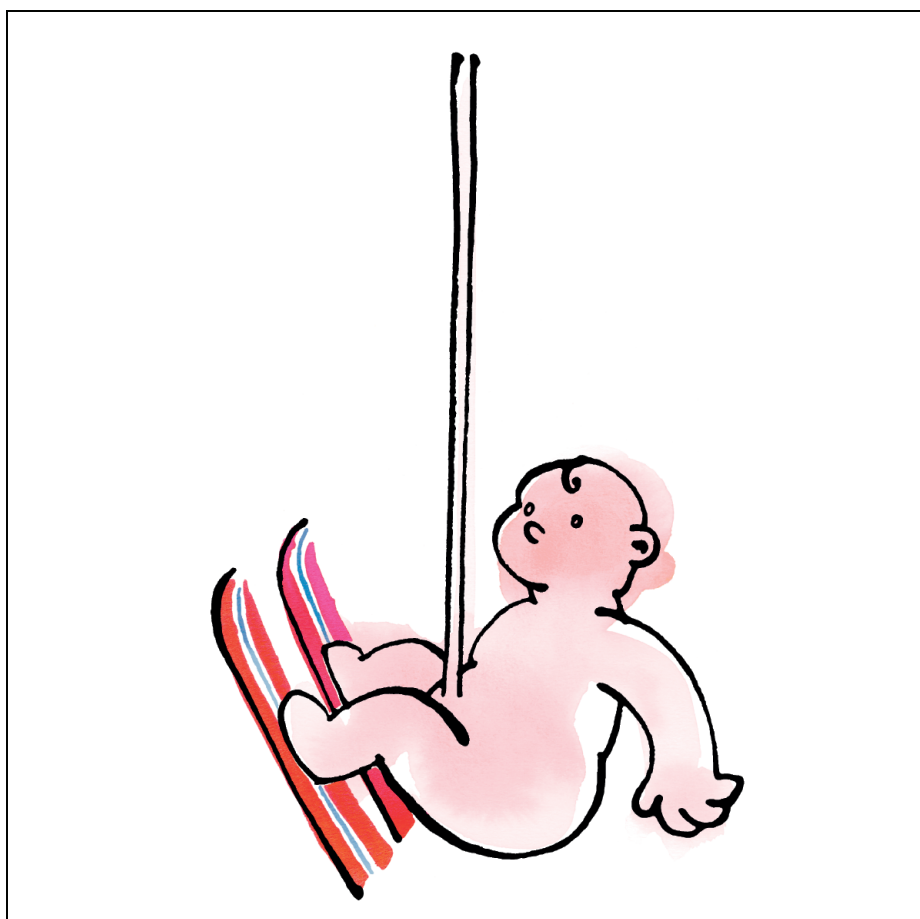
The diagnosis is based on a thorough anamnesis. Neurological examinations, EEG and CT or MR scans of the brain tend to show normal results. Neuropsychological or psychiatric testing may reveal certain deviant personality traits; some may display elements of hypochondria or narcissism.

A typical feature is for afflicted persons to bring three thermometers to ski training or races – one for measuring air temperature, one for measuring snow temperature and one for measuring rectal temperature.

Terms worth knowing

Sufferers tend to use a special terminology that one ought to know in order to be able to communicate with them and for diagnostic purposes:

- Classical – skiing method. Unrelated to classical education.
- Double-dance – skiing method. Unrelated to ballrooms.



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- Paddling – skiing method. Unrelated to water sports.
- Pole position – the correct way to hold the poles. Unrelated to motor races.
- Drooling – removal of glider wax. Unrelated to saliva.
- Condom – skier's outfit. Unrelated to contraception.
- Negative preference – i.e. they feel most comfortable in blue degrees. Similar to businessmen, who also hate to be in the red.
- Get hitched – get out on skis (hitch the bindings).

Complications

Complications occur frequently, and include heart arrhythmia caused by enlarged atria with an increased tendency to atric fibrillation. Excessive training is common. This is detectable not only in an increased resting pulse, but also when the sufferer regularly falls asleep at parties («a social disaster»).

Many tend to have a problematic family and sex life. One heavily afflicted sufferer told me that his wife had given him an ultimatum: «The skis or me!» He told me that this was an easy choice: it ended in a ski-sm. Many sufferers do the Birkebeiner Ski Marathon. Before the start at Rena, many tend to have trouble expressing themselves clearly, so-called ski-sophasia. At the finish line in Lillehammer one can often observe post-Birkebeiner cramps or failure-to-win-the-badge depressions. Here, an increased risk of suicide should be taken into account. In serious cases an anti-depressive drug should be considered, preferably Ski-pramil or Ski-pralex. Some sufferers lose all contact with reality and develop ski madness, so-called ski-zophrenia. The preferred treatment is Ski-ordinol.

For skiencephalic persons, the summer season can be a major strain. Many suffer from abstinence and summer melancholia.

Most of them dislike the sun and warm weather, since the sun is the bane of all snow. Many go chasing the snow, even in summer.

Most of the afflicted persons have run out of nourishment on at least one occasion. They will then eat anything available. One acquaintance told me that of all the ski waxes, green Swix had the best taste.

Are Norwegians more competitive than Swedes?

Among some colleagues in Sweden I overheard the following conversation: «Last winter I did the Vasa Ski Marathon.» «Wow, that's impressive!»

In Norway, an equivalent conversation would go something like this: «Last winter I did the Birkebeiner Ski Marathon.» «What was your finishing time?»

Roller skis – a poor substitute

In the summer season some use roller skis on asphalted roads, but most of them miss the opportunity to go out into the terrain. A proposal has therefore been made to pave all the ski tracks in the forests around Oslo.

To avoid ice forming on them in late autumn they must be heated, but the heating must naturally be turned off as soon as the first snow falls.

Fridtjof Nansen – a role model

Nansen was a devoted skier, and the following Nansen quotes are frequently heard among skiencephalic persons:

- Skiing is the sport of sports.
- A person's character is formed while skiing across the lonely mountain plateaus.
- The path to the Norwegian national spirit is through skiing (his advice to the new Norwegian royal family in 1905).
- Ski tracks are the most beautiful traces left by mankind on the surface of the earth.

Many of the afflicted claim that skiing is not just any hobby, passion or interest, but a way of life. Many have their own mottos:

- If you're feeling low, get out in the snow.
- Skiing, I think, makes your belly shrink.
- Don't ski for a day, and life's wasting away

- Two ski tracks diverged in a wood, and I – I took the one less traveled by, and that has made all the difference. (Skiencephalic persons tend to like Robert Frost).

Poor prognosis

The condition is most often chronic, and afflicted persons are not very motivated to receive treatment. Late-onset sufferers tend to be most seriously afflicted. Most of them have an intense desire to die with their skis on. And they all share the humble wish for there to be some good snow on the other side.

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