HELMETS: TO WEAR OR NOT TO WEAR

Since 1990 a number of countries (including Australia) as well as various U.S. states and Canadian provinces have enacted legislation requiring the use of bicycle helmets to minimize the risk of head injury.* The Québec Ski Areas Association has made helmets mandatory in snow parks since the 2006–2007 ski season. Bike helmet laws apply only to children in some cases. Some groups want the laws to apply to everyone, whereas others feel that users should be the ones deciding whether to wear a helmet. Still others strongly oppose bike helmet laws, except for sports competitions. In your opinion, should there be helmet laws for amateur sports such as cycling?

* A head injury is a trauma to the head causing potentially serious injury to the brain. Symptoms may include headache, vertigo, nausea, neck pain, irritability, fatigue, and so on.

IDENTIFYING THE CONTROVERSY AND EXPRESSING YOUR VALUES

1. What question does this issue raise?

2. Do you favour or oppose mandatory helmet use? Justify your answer.

3. What do you regard as the key points in this debate?
4. Rate your criteria for buying sports equipment by order of importance from 1 to 6 (1 being the most important).

- [ ] Appearance
- [ ] Cost
- [ ] Comfort
- [ ] Safety
- [ ] How the equipment performs
- [ ] Brand name

5. Based on your answer to the preceding question, would you say that you attach great or little importance to safety when practising a sport? Explain why.

6. In your opinion, does bicycle safety necessarily mean wearing a helmet? Explain your answer.

GATHERING INFORMATION


Complete the table on the next page as you read. Remember to cite your sources of information.

7. What role does a helmet play in a sport such as cycling?

8. Where is the cerebrum located in the body? What protects it?
9. Name two sports that involve a high risk of head injury.
   • __________________________________________________________
   • __________________________________________________________

10. What are the possible consequences of a head injury?
    • __________________________________________________________
    • __________________________________________________________
    • __________________________________________________________

11. Name two advantages of wearing a helmet when practising certain sports.
    • __________________________________________________________
    • __________________________________________________________

12. Name two disadvantages of wearing a helmet when practising certain sports.
    • __________________________________________________________
    • __________________________________________________________

13. Provide three arguments in favour of legislating the use of bike helmets.
    • __________________________________________________________
    • __________________________________________________________
    • __________________________________________________________

Sources of information

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14. Provide three arguments against legislating the use of bike helmets.

15. Based on the information you gathered, take a position on the issue and write a short opinion piece. Point out the advantages and disadvantages of wearing a bike helmet. If you think it possible to reconcile the two positions, provide arguments justifying that point of view.
REFLECTING ON YOUR APPROACH

16. What other information would help solidify your position in this controversy?

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17. Has your opinion about helmet use changed since you began this activity? Explain why.

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The Canadian Academy of Sport Medicine reports that bicycles account for 100 to 130 fatalities a year, not to mention 50,000 injuries requiring medical attention. The Canada Safety Council reports that 42 cyclists were killed in 2000. Children in rural areas are the most likely to be hurt while riding their bikes. Between 1986 and 1998, according to the Québec Coroner’s Office, 406 cyclists died in circumstances other than vehicular collisions. Of that total, 47 percent of youths aged 5 to 14—boys for the most part—suffered craniocerebral trauma and 13.9 percent craniocervical injury. ... Dr. Kenneth Shaw, Director of Emergency Surgery at the Montréal Children’s Hospital, explains that hitting the ground or a tree at 7 km/h is enough to fracture the skull. Even without an actual fracture, a head injury or concussion can have consequences such as epilepsy, diminished intellectual capacity or memory, or altered personality.

Although the vast majority of Canadians (97 percent) acknowledge that helmets guard against head injury, some do not use them because they find them bulky (14 percent), unattractive (14 percent), “not cool” (13 percent) or uncomfortable (11 percent).

According to the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission, bicycle helmets can lower the risk of head injury by 85 percent when they are worn fully on the head instead of tilted back and when the strap is secured under the chin. It also bears noting that cyclists who wear a helmet experience far fewer injuries to the soft tissues of the face ... or serious injury to the mid-facial area, nose, eyes and eye sockets.

Vélo Québec cautions that helmets cannot provide full protection in the case of a direct impact at 20 km/h. Still, helmets consistent with ANSI, CSA International or SNELL Foundation safety standards provide for a 90 percent reduction in the energy absorbed by the skull during an accident at 15 km/h, the normal cycling speed. The helmet shell is made of rigid polycarbonate ... covering extra-strength expanded polyurethane foam (EPU). Well-ventilated EPU dissipates the heat that builds up between the cyclist’s head and helmet. Despite irrefutable arguments in favour of wearing helmets, few cyclists use them. More specifically, only 2 percent of elementary and high-school students and 30 percent of adults wear one. In 1994, community health departments in Québec promoted helmet use through a widespread school-based awareness campaign featuring videos, posters and lectures. The rate of helmet use subsequently rose from 1 percent to 6 percent. ...

A few years back, a pharmaceutical firm supplied pediatricians with rebate coupons intended to encourage patients to buy a helmet. Those campaigns did little to boost the rate of helmet use. In fact, some studies show no lasting improvement at all. Promotional offers and recommendations are not enough. Legislation is needed, even though such laws have not had the desired effects in every place they have been introduced.

In Maryland, for example, legislation boosted helmet use from 5 percent to 47 percent. In Victoria, Australia, helmet use rose from 70 percent to 90 percent after the law was enacted. Head injuries plummeted 48 percent the next year and 70 percent in the second year. British Columbia has a law requiring all cyclists, children and adults alike, to wear a helmet. Dr. Richard Stanwick points out that close police surveillance and fines have raised compliance to 93 percent at present. In 1995 Ontario enacted a law requiring cyclists under age 18 to wear a helmet; similar laws have applied to all cyclists in Nova Scotia and New Brunswick since 1997.

All Canadian provinces should enact such laws, which cannot work unless police departments enforce them and issue the necessary fines.
1. “YES” TO MANDATORY USE OF BICYCLE HELMETS (continued)

It has been suggested that the police confiscate the bicycles of children who are not wearing a helmet. Parents would have to report to the police station to claim their child's bike. After several trips to the station, parents would make their children comply! No helmet, no bike! Parents should be the first to set the example. Another possibility is rewarding children who wear their helmet without being told. The Canadian Paediatric Society's Injury Prevention Committee has recommended selling helmets together with bicycles.

If helmets do indeed make for 85 percent fewer head injuries having a host of adverse consequences, wouldn't it be logical for all Canadian provinces to legislate helmet use in order to save lives and prevent injuries, not to mention avoid the exorbitant costs incurred?

2. “NO” TO MANDATORY USE OF BICYCLE HELMETS

(Excerpts)

The latest figures from several countries that have legislated the use of protective helmets tend to corroborate that it would be ill-advised to follow suit. The number of opponents grows as the effects of these laws become quantifiable. Critics argue that this requirement has led to a considerable decline in cycling, without any noticeable reduction in the number of cycling injuries.

We hasten to say that the mandatory use of protective bicycle helmets is not a worldwide movement that Québec is obligated to join. Of the world's 200 or so countries, only Australia and New Zealand have legislated to make helmet use obligatory for everyone at all times. Countries with large cycling populations, such as the Netherlands and Denmark, not to mention Germany, Switzerland and others, refuse to go this route. Closer to home, some 15 U.S. states have enacted a wide range of regulations for cyclists under age 12, under age 14, under age 16, and so on. Apparently, an equal number of states have rejected this move. Given these developments, it is not always easy to grasp the reasoning behind certain legislative decisions. California, for instance, requires cyclists under age 18 to wear a helmet, but has repealed this requirement for motorcyclists.

Vélo Québec hopes that the Québec government will use this fresh opportunity to discuss and debate road safety strategies. It wishes for the government to devise an action plan consistent with traditional legislative and educational practices in many spheres of human behaviour. Our association further hopes that educational and legislative strategies, as well as improved infrastructure and signage, will be developed to achieve our objective: not only increase the rate of bicycle helmet use, which is only one of several possible measures, but also reduce the number of cycling victims.

Source: Vélo Québec brief to the Transportation and Environment Commission, January 2000. [Translation]