

Protecting your noggin a no-brainer

By Teddi Dineley Johnson

Too hard-headed to wear a helmet when bicycling or motorcycling? If so, think again — while your brain is still intact. Crashes happen, and riders who stubbornly refuse to protect their noggins might unwittingly find that they have much in common with a raw egg rolling off the kitchen counter.

In the biking world, helmets are often called “brain buckets” and “cranium catchers,” and with good reason: Helmets are the single most effective means of preventing a head injury that can lead to death or permanent disability.

According to the Brain Injury Association of America, wearing a properly fitted helmet for any recreational activity that incorporates speed and your head — including in-line skating, skiing, horseback riding and a host of other sports — is a preventive step that can greatly decrease the risk of suffering a potentially serious or fatal head injury.

A helmet is sort of like an additional skull that works like a brake or a shock absorber.

making an impact

Don't scramble your brains:

“A brain injury is life altering,” says Richard O'Brien, MD, FACEP, an emergency physician at Moses Taylor Hospital in Scranton, Pa., and national spokesperson for the American College of Emergency Physicians.

“No one should get on any two-wheeled vehicle, whether it is a Schwinn or a Harley, without a helmet,” O'Brien says.

Bicycle helmets are nearly 90 percent effective in preventing brain injuries,

according to the American College of Emergency Physicians. They also prevent tens of thousands

of scalp and face injuries annually.

“So take all the time you need to decide, while your head is hurtling towards the pavement at 55 miles per hour, whether or not you need a safety helmet,” O'Brien says.

Consider the alternative.



Blessed with lush locks? The heat and humidity inside your helmet will leave you with a condition called “helmet hair.” But better to have your hair poke out in all directions than your brain, right?

● Scooter chic

Today's scooters, with their fast wheels and sleek designs, put young scooter users at greater risk of losing control and crashing.

Requiring your child to wear a helmet when riding a scooter reduces the risk of head injury by as much as 85 percent, according to the American College of Emergency Physicians.

When a helmet, with a head inside, slams into an unyielding object, such as a rock, a wall or the pavement, the force of the impact is spread over the hard outer shell.

The soft inner liner crushes and breaks, which uses up a lot of the energy. That said, isn't it smarter to let your helmet absorb the impact, instead of your brain?

The National Highway Transportation Safety Administration estimates that helmets saved the lives of 1,546 motorcyclists in 2005. An additional 728 road warriors could have been saved if all motorcyclists had worn helmets.

The passage of helmet use laws has been found to be the most effective method of increasing helmet use. When states abandon or weaken mandatory helmet laws, deaths go up. Right now, all but four states — Colorado, Illinois, Iowa and New Hampshire — require some or all motorcyclists to wear helmets.

Not sure which helmet to wear for which sport? The Brain Injury Association of America, in partnership with the Consumer Product Safety Commission, promotes the use of appropriate safety helmets through a free, downloadable brochure, “Which Helmet for Which Activity?” available online at www.biausa.org.

● Heads up

Bald? Try wearing a bandanna under your helmet to absorb sweat and minimize the rubbing of your helmet against your scalp.

Factoid:
Bicycle helmets are 90% effective in preventing brain injuries.

● A good fit matters

Over its lifetime, the average helmet's protective abilities come into play for only about two to four milliseconds. The rest of the time it's just going to sit on your head looking cool, so a comfortable fit is important. Helmet manufacturers recommend trying on several before making a purchase. The chin strap should fit around your ear and under your chin snugly and comfortably, and the helmet should not shift on your head. Also, a helmet is meant to be worn low on the forehead, just above your eyebrows. When in doubt, ask a store representative for help.

For more information on helmet safety, visit www.helmets.org.



 American Public Health Association