

CENTRAL CONNECTICUT HEALTH DISTRICT

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Be Safe While Riding a Bicycle

Few people know that the first recorded automobile accident occurred in 1896 in New York City, when a car collided with a bicycle. One hundred seven years later, in 2003, 622 bicyclists were killed and 46,000 more were injured in traffic accidents (National Center for Statistics & Analysis). With 85 million bike riders in the United States, it may not be surprising that bicycling results in 11.5% of all sports-related injuries, after basketball (21.2%) and football (20.7%), according to the National Sporting Goods Association. In an effort to help reduce bicycle-related deaths and injuries, May has been declared National Bike Month by the League of American Bicyclists.

The Bicycle Safety Institute notes that 540,000 emergency room visits are the result of injuries caused by bicycle accidents. Head injuries account for about 67,000 of these emergency room visits. However, these injuries are only the tip of the iceberg, as the majority of the injuries resulting from bike crashes are not serious enough to warrant a trip to the hospital. To avoid becoming a victim of a bicycle accident, a review of safety measures is a good idea.

The first thing to do before taking a spin on a bicycle is to check the bike itself. The bicycle needs to be the proper size for the rider – while sitting on the seat, the balls of both feet should touch the ground. The bike should have a working bell or horn, front headlight, and rear reflectors. Check the brakes (pads and cables should be in good condition), tires (do they have enough air?), be sure the chain is clean and oiled, check to see if all the bolts are tight, and be sure the wheels are centered and secure.

When riding, the cyclist has the same responsibility as the motorist to obey all the rules of the road: ride on the right side of the road, obey all traffic signals and signs (including yielding to traffic that has the right of way), know how to shoulder check before turning, and use proper hand signals. Do not weave between parked cars, do not pass on the right, and keep **both** hands ready to brake. Make eye contact with drivers of motor vehicles and assume they do not see you otherwise. Avoid road hazards such as broken glass, ice, sewer grates, and debris.

Riding a bicycle also requires proper attire. It is a good idea to dress in layers to adjust for changing weather conditions, wear bright colored clothing during day and night riding, and wear a reflective vest or safety triangle, especially at night. Probably the single most important item to remember is a properly fitted bicycle helmet.

While 90% of bicycling fatalities are caused by collisions with motor vehicles, fewer than 20% of all reported bicycle injuries involve cars, and the remainder of the injuries occur in falls, hitting a stationary object, or running into another bike or pedestrian. Most of these accidents result in the forehead hitting the ground first, leading to serious head injuries when helmets are not worn. In fact, the U.S. Department of Transportation reports that 85% of bicyclists killed in 2002 were not wearing helmets. The CPSC asserts that wearing a bike helmet can reduce the risk of head injury by 85%, yet they report that 43% of bicycle riders never wear helmets. The Bicycle Helmet Safety Institute estimates that “75% of bicycle-

related fatalities among children could be prevented with a bicycle helmet,” preventing between 135 and 155 deaths, between 39,000 and 45,000 head injuries, and between 18,000 and 55,000 scalp and facial injuries in children aged 4-15.

And wearing a helmet is a good idea for adults as well, since adult bicyclists now account for more than $\frac{3}{4}$ of all bicycle deaths, according to the Insurance Institute for Highway Safety.

Although there is no federal law in this country requiring bicycle helmets, Connecticut is one of 20 states (and the District of Columbia) that requires helmets for at least certain segments of the population. Another 16 states include some municipalities or counties that have passed mandatory helmet laws. In Connecticut, all bicyclists up to the age of 16 must wear a bicycle helmet when riding. The Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC) reports that of bikers who report wearing a helmet, 44% said they wore it because a law required it.

However, the existence of a helmet law is only part of the answer. A defective or improperly worn helmet may provide very little protection. Bicycle helmets are purposely made to endure one significant fall or accident. After that, they lose their capacity to absorb shock and need to be replaced. When buying a new helmet, look for a “CPSC” or “Snell” sticker to be sure it meets CPSC safety standards. The helmet should fit snugly without being uncomfortable, protecting the forehead without slipping forward or backward. Straps should be adjusted to hold the helmet securely on the head, which means they must be clipped together under the chin, and should not be loose. The helmet should be worn down on the forehead, about 1 inch above the eyebrows, not on the back of the head. (Wearing a helmet tipped back on the heads increases the risk of head injury by 52%, according to the Bicycle Helmet Safety Institute.)

Helmets need not be expensive to be safe. Discount department stores often sell certified helmets starting at \$15 to \$20. The Central Connecticut Health District sells Snell certified helmets for \$10, in a variety of colors in both children’s and adult sizes.

To learn more about bicycle safety, the following web sites are recommended: the Canada Safety Council (www.safety-council.org), www.bicyclesafe.com, the National Center for Statistics and Analysis (www.nhtsa.dot.gov), www.kidshealth.org, the American Academy of Pediatrics (www.aap.org), National Safe Kids Campaign (www.safekids.org), or the Bicycle Helmet Safety Institute (www.bhsi.org), at 703-486-0100). To obtain further information about this or any other public health concern, or for information about purchasing a low-cost bicycle helmet, contact the Central Connecticut Health District at 860-721-2822, or www.ccthd.org.