

Motorcycle Helmets Common Myths and the Facts

Myth: *Helmets cause neck or spinal-cord injuries.*

FACT: This is not true. Research studies have consistently found that helmets reduce injuries. Five studies reviewed by the United States General Accounting Office all reported a higher incidence of severe neck injuries for unhelmeted riders. An Illinois study found that helmets decrease the number of significant spinal injuries.

Myth: *Helmets reduce peripheral vision.*

FACT: This is not true. Helmets do not hinder peripheral vision or contribute to crashes. Normal peripheral vision is approximately 180 degrees, and federal safety standards require that helmets provide 210 degrees of vision. Over 90 percent of crashes happen within a range of 160 degrees (with the majority of the remainder occurring from directly behind).

Myth: *Helmets prevent hearing significant traffic noise.*

FACT: This is not true. Helmets do not affect a rider's ability to distinguish between sounds. In fact, some studies indicate that helmets are useful in reducing wind noise and protecting hearing. The University of Southern California conducted 900 on-scene, in-depth investigations of motorcycle-crash scenes (the "Hurt Study") and did not uncover a single case in which a rider could not detect a critical traffic sound. Vision is the predominant sense for detecting hazards, not hearing.

Myth: *Helmets give a rider a false sense of security and therefore increase risk-taking behavior.*

FACT: This is not true. No research indicates that helmeted riders take more risks than unhelmeted riders. There is some evidence, however, that riders who always wear full gear and never drink alcoholic beverages before operating their motorcycle ride in a less risky manner than others.

Myth: *Helmets cause heat exhaustion.*

FACT: This is not true. Heat exhaustion is seldom a problem for motorcyclists, and there is no evidence that helmets are a contributory cause in the rare occasions it occurs. To the contrary, dehydration is a possible problem for riders; and wearing proper protective gear, including a helmet, will lessen the likelihood of dehydration by diminishing the effects of hot wind and helping to retain body moisture.

Myth: *Age-specific laws or helmet laws covering only some riders are effective.*

FACT: This is not true. These laws complicate the job of law enforcement. The result is that anyone who chooses not to wear a helmet can do so without meeting the requirements of the law. Statistics show that helmet use in states with laws that require only some riders to wear helmets is about the same as in those states having no helmet law at all.

Myth: *Statistics show that fatality rates are lower in states without helmet laws.*

FACT: This is not true. Reputable studies consistently show an increase in fatality rates after the repeal of a mandatory helmet law. Comparisons should be made across years within the same state rather than across states in the same year. This is because states differ significantly on a number of factors, such as weather, length of riding season, population density, and urban versus rural roads.

- **FACT: Helmets prevent brain injury.**
- **FACT: Helmets save lives and prevent devastating and debilitating head injuries.**
- **FACT: Motorcyclists who ride without helmets (or with novelty helmets) run a significantly greater risk of death or permanent injury.**
- **FACT: When a helmet law covering all riders is in effect, almost all riders wear a helmet. When helmet laws are weakened or repealed, helmet use drops significantly.**