

Best friends forever: Skis, snowboards and helmets



By Corrine Langill, RN, BScN, CHEO

Each winter, CHEO neurosurgeon Michael Vassilyadi wonders how many children and youth he'll care for because they weren't wearing a helmet when skiing or snowboarding. When children and youth fall, lose control or crash into trees or other people on the slopes, they can hit their heads hard. Of all the injuries that happen when skiing and snowboarding, head injuries are usually the most serious; they cause almost 9 out of every 10 skiing and snowboarding deaths.

During ski season, doctors and nurses in CHEO's Emergency Department also treat many children and youth with concussions. Concussions are common brain injuries that cause changes in how the brain works, even though these changes can't be seen on x-rays or other tests. And while most children and youth recover quite well, concussions can cause long lasting problems and make later hits to the head even more serious.

But skiing and snowboarding falls and crashes don't always have to cause concussions or more serious head injuries. Researchers believe that for every 10 people who wear a helmet, up to six can avoid a head injury. So a helmet can make a big difference.

The good news is that more and more children and youth are wearing helmets when they head for the hills. But there are still too many skiers who don't wear helmets. During the 2005-2006 ski season, only one in three skiers with a head injury who took part in a study in CHEO's emergency department had worn a helmet. Things were a little better for snowboarders who had a head injury, with more than half wearing a helmet when they got hurt.

How can parents prevent serious head injuries when skiing or snowboarding? First, make sure your children learn to ski or snowboard from qualified instructors. And make sure that both you and your children wear helmets. In 2008, the Canadian Standards Association (CSA) developed a new standard for multi-impact ski and snowboard helmets. But because this standard was released just recently, helmets

with the CSA seal aren't available in stores just yet. Instead, look for ski and snowboard helmets that have been certified by Snell or ATSM (American Standard for Testing and Materials).

Adding helmets to your usual snow gear can prevent serious head injuries and keep you out on the slopes, instead of in the emergency department. So pack up your skis, snowboards and helmets, and head for the hills!

For more information on how to prevent head injuries check out:

- www.cheo.on.ca Follow the links to Health information A-Z, and click on our Helmets for all Seasons fact sheet
- www.thinkfirst.ca

The Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario (CHEO) was established in Ottawa in 1974 as a freestanding paediatric hospital. Over the past 3 decades, CHEO has grown into one of the most respected children's hospitals anywhere. CHEO provides a full and growing spectrum of clinical paediatric services, serves as a training ground for tomorrow's health care providers through its affiliation with the University of Ottawa, and conducts research at the frontiers of paediatric medicine.

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