

Safety & Prevention

Bicycle Helmets: What Every Parent Should Know

How can I tell if a helmet will keep my child safe?

You should only buy a helmet that meets the bicycle helmet safety standards of the Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC). Any helmet meeting these standards is labeled. Check the inside.

Do all helmets meet these standards?

All helmets manufactured or imported for use after March 1999 must comply with a mandatory safety standard issued by the CPSC.

Can other kinds of helmets be used for bicycling?

Each type of helmet is designed for protection in specific conditions and may not offer enough protection in bike crashes or falls. Bike helmets are very protective in head-first falls at fairly high speeds, and are light and well ventilated for comfort and acceptability. A multisport helmet, certified to meet the CPSC standard for bicycle helmets, also is acceptable.

Where can I get a helmet?

Helmets meeting CPSC safety standards are available at bicycle shops and at some discount, department, and toy stores in adult, children, and toddler's sizes and styles. Do not resell, donate, or buy a used bike helmet because it may be too old to provide protection or may have been in a crash.

Which is better, hard-shell or soft-shell helmets?

The essential part of the helmet for impact protection is a thick layer of firm polystyrene, plastic foam, that crushes on impact, absorbing the force of the blow. All helmets require a chin strap to keep them in place in a crash.

Hard-shell helmets also have a hard outer shell of plastic or fiberglass that provides a shield against penetration by sharp objects and holds the polystyrene together if it cracks in a fall or crash. These helmets are more sturdy, but tend to be heavier and warmer than the soft-shell models.

Soft-shell helmets have no hard outer shell but are made of an extra-thick layer of polystyrene covered with a cloth cover or surface coating. The cloth cover is an essential part of many soft-shell helmets. If the helmet comes with a cover, the cover must always be worn to hold the helmet together if the polystyrene cracks on impact.

Both types of helmets meet CPSC standards; the main difference is style and comfort. The soft-shell helmets are lighter than the hard shell versions but may be less durable.

Although there is no consensus on the relative safety of the 2 types, models of both types have passed the CPSC test. The soft-shell helmets are lighter than the hard-shell versions but may be less durable.

How should a helmet fit?

A helmet should be worn squarely on top of the head, covering the top of the forehead. If it is tipped back, it will not protect the forehead. The helmet fits well if it doesn't move around on the head or slide down over the wearer's eyes when pushed or pulled. The chin strap should be adjusted to fit snugly.

Are there helmets for infants?

Yes. Many infant-sized helmets are of the soft-shell variety. They are light, an important consideration for small children whose necks may not be strong enough to comfortably hold a hard-shell helmet. Babies younger than 1 year have relatively weak neck structure. Neither helmets nor bike traveling is recommended for them.

How long will a child's helmet fit?

An infant's or child's helmet should fit for several years. Most models have removable fitting pads that can be replaced with thinner ones as the child's head grows.

Can a helmet be reused after a crash?

In general, a helmet that has been through a serious fall or crash should be retired with gratitude. It has served its purpose and may not provide adequate protection in another crash. If you are uncertain whether the helmet is still usable, throw it away.

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