

Health MATTERS

May 2006

Protecting your head

Wear the gear, wear it right!

With spring in full bloom, children have eagerly dusted off their bicycles and are out riding again. Kids love the freedom of riding their bicycles. Wearing properly fitted helmets will allow them to continue this great outdoor activity for years to come.

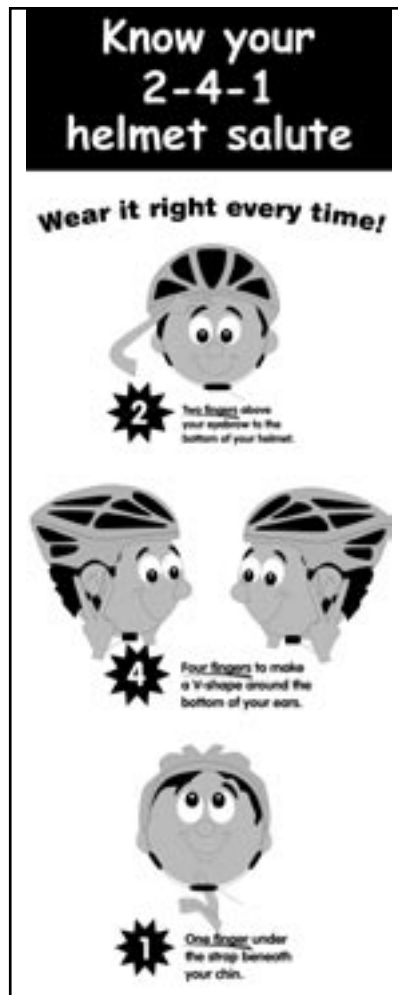
Each year, hundreds of children will be hospitalized with head injuries—and some of them may die—as a result of not wearing a helmet or not wearing it properly. This is why it is critical that parents take the time each year to review helmet safety with their children before they begin this enjoyable outdoor activity. Just remembering a few helpful tips may prevent serious head injuries and may save your child’s life.

Wear the Gear

Helmets absorb the force of an impact by spreading that force over the entire helmet, reducing the impact on your head and brain. Yes, skulls are hard, but they are not thick. The skull can easily crack in a fall from a bicycle. The brain floats in a sac of fluid and any trauma to the head can cause potential movement of the brain, resulting in bleeding and swelling of the brain. A bike helmet worn properly will reduce the risk of head injury by up to 85 per cent. (Safe Kids Canada, 2005)

Reading the instructions that come with the helmet is as important as wearing it. A proper fit is critical for protection.

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Graphics courtesy of City of Toronto and thinkfirst

Purchasing a Helmet

- Always take a helmet out of the box and check its fit before buying.
- Check for the Canadian safety approved stickers: CSA, ASTM, Snell, CPSC, BSI and SAA.
- The pads that come with a new helmet will help fit the helmet properly.
- Don’t buy a used helmet. Helmets are designed to work with one crash only and then need to be replaced. If you don’t know the history of the helmet, don’t use it.
- Use only bike helmets for bikes. Hockey helmets are not designed to absorb the same impacts that can happen with bike collisions or falls.

In Ontario, cyclists under 18 are required by law to wear an approved bicycle helmet when riding a bike on a roadway or sidewalk. Legislation makes it clear to the public that helmets are necessary. In areas that have child bike helmet laws, there are 25 per cent fewer head injuries from cycling than in provinces without legislation.

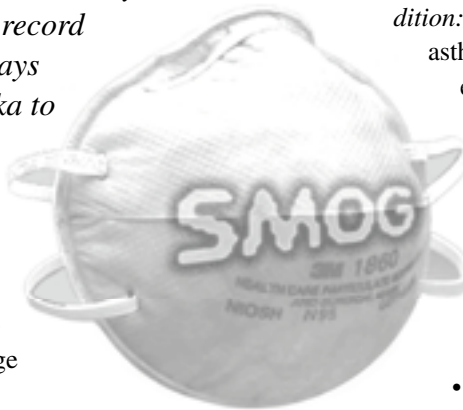
For more information on helmet safety, visit the Safe Kids website at www.safekidscanada.ca.



Breathing is easy—when there's no smog

The past six years have seen a rise in days with heavy smog. In the summer of 2005, there were a record 53 smog alerts in Ontario. Locally, smog days ranged from 30 in northern Simcoe Muskoka to 44 days in the south end of the region. In other words, we had poor air quality for up to a third of the summer.

Smog causes an increase in emergency room visits and hospital stays. Research also shows that breathing polluted air can lead to serious long-term damage to the heart and lungs.



- *Older adults and people with an existing health condition:* Air pollution can worsen conditions like asthma, emphysema, allergies and heart disease. It also speeds up the aging process that causes decreased lung function.
- *Adults:* Exercise increases heart activity. Deep and rapid breathing, and mouth breathing increases exposure to air pollutants. It is estimated that adults lose 15 to 20 per cent of lung function while exercising moderately in poor air conditions.
- *Pregnant women:* Recent studies suggest air pollutants could reach the unborn baby and the chances of low birth weight might increase.

Air Quality Index

The Ontario Ministry of the Environment measures six pollutants to determine the Air Quality Index (AQI). These six pollutants—ozone, particulate matter, nitrous oxides, volatile organic compounds, sulphur dioxide, and carbon monoxide—may cause harmful health effects. If the local AQI is above 50, the ministry will issue a smog alert for the area. Even when the AQI is moderate or good, there are still contaminants in the air that may be harmful. The ministry plans to improve the AQI to make it easier to understand.

Health Effects

The Ontario Medical Association report *The Illness Costs of Air Pollution* states that there were 211 premature deaths, 2,052 emergency trips to hospitals and health care costs of \$15.86 million, all linked to air pollution, in Simcoe and Muskoka last year. A copy of this report can be found on the Simcoe Muskoka District Health Unit website at www.simcoemuskokahealth.org.

Depending on the pollutant, smog can cause difficulty breathing, irritation in the lung and throat, or worsen existing conditions. It lowers lung function, and can increase the possibility of heart or lung disease.

Some people are more likely to become ill from poor air quality. For instance:

- *Children:* Children are very active and breathe more rapidly to fuel their growing bodies. As a result they are more vulnerable to long-term exposure that can cause lung damage and hamper lung growth.

Do your part

To protect your health during a smog advisory:

- be aware of environmental conditions in your region. Air quality is reported at www.airqualityontario.com
- avoid being outside around high traffic areas or at peak rush hours
- take lots of rest breaks (in the shade or in air-conditioned buildings) if you must be outside
- delay strenuous activity when possible
- if you experience uncommon (or unusual) breathing difficulties, seek medical attention.

Some steps you can take to help clear the air:

- use public transit
- avoid idling the car
- keep the car well maintained
- plant trees for cooling shade and to improve the air
- consider a more fuel-efficient vehicle on your next purchase
- switch to energy-saving options such as fluorescent light bulbs and appliances that indicate the EnerGuide rating
- when renovating, think air-friendly materials by looking for the “Eco-logo” on consumer products.

For more information, call Health Connection Monday to Friday, 8:30 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. 721-7520 (1-877-721-7520).



Sudden Infant Death Syndrome

Will it affect my baby?

You are overwhelmed with joy—your baby is finally here! But you notice that sometimes when she is sleeping you can hardly tell whether she is breathing. You begin to worry about Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS).

What is SIDS?

Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS), also known as crib death, refers to the sudden and unexpected death of a healthy infant less than one year of age. The death remains unexplained even after a complete investigation.

No one knows why a seemingly well baby dies so suddenly and so unexpectedly. What we do know is that close to three babies die of SIDS each week in Canada. Each year new theories surface as to what causes SIDS. However, none of the theories has produced the answer that will help us to prevent SIDS.

What Can I Do?

No one knows how to prevent SIDS—but the latest research shows that there are ways to make your baby safer:

- Place your baby on her back on a firm, flat surface to sleep. Studies from several countries worldwide have reported a dramatic lowering of SIDS rates for all infants when the tummy-down sleeping position is avoided.
- Provide a smoke-free environment for your baby. Babies who regularly breathe in second-hand smoke have a greater risk of dying from SIDS.
- Keep baby's crib free of objects such as pillows, bumper pads, comforters or duvets. This will help maintain good air circulation around your baby.
- Breastfeed your baby. Breastfeeding has been proven to have significant health benefits for your baby and may give some protection against SIDS.
- Keep your baby comfortable but not overheated. If the room temperature is comfortable for you, then your infant should be fine, too. Consider dressing your baby in sleepers so that you don't need a blanket to cover her.

Will sleeping with my baby make her safer?

Many parents enjoy bed-sharing with their baby. While bed-sharing does not necessarily reduce the risk of SIDS, it is important to know that the risk of SIDS is increased if your baby sleeps with a person who smokes. Your baby is also at risk if she is sharing a bed with a person who has been drinking alcohol or taking drugs, since they are less able to respond to your baby's needs.

Would giving my baby a soother help?

More research is needed to understand the link between sucking and SIDS. What we do know is that a pacifier or soother can interfere with breastfeeding success, if offered before breastfeeding is well established. This is a concern when we consider that breastfeeding may offer some protection against SIDS.

Is “tummy time” safe for my baby ?

It is recommended that babies sleep on their backs because it decreases the risk of SIDS. But this does not mean that an infant should never be on her tummy when awake. Babies need supervised tummy time several times a day. This helps develop the strength and skills needed for crawling, walking and using their hands.

Once you have done what you can to reduce the risk of SIDS, kiss your beautiful baby and get some sleep. You will need it so you can enjoy all that parenthood has to offer!



What else should I know about SIDS?

- SIDS cannot be predicted or prevented at this time.
- SIDS is not caused by neglect or child abuse.
- SIDS is not considered hereditary.
- SIDS is not caused by vaccinations or by toxic gases.
- SIDS is not contagious or infectious.
- SIDS is not a new medical problem.
- SIDS probably has more than one cause.
- SIDS occurs rapidly and silently, usually during periods of sleep.
- SIDS does not appear to cause a baby suffering.
- SIDS is not anyone's fault.

Simcoe Muskoka Trails

Something for Every Body

Trails are good for you! Our bodies were meant to move. The many urban and rural trails in Simcoe and Muskoka offer a fun way to improve your fitness, refresh the mind, appreciate the beauty of our natural habitats and boost your energy level.

Exploring local routes is a fun, active way to bring family and friends together. Walking a trail along an abandoned rail corridor or historical portage route can also help us rediscover the past.

Trail websites and brochures can provide you with the information you need to find a trail that's right for you—from paved pathways suitable for wheelchairs and baby strollers, to level, converted rail beds to remote and rugged terrain.

Short on time, money or transportation? No problem. For families with young children or those who can't walk far, trail groups are busy developing short loop trails, and many longer trails feature short-cuts. For those on a budget, trails are free to use—and require little more than a pair of comfortable shoes, unless you're taking longer overnight excursions. Many walking routes are

in urban areas close to home, where neighbours can form stroller fitness groups. If you join a hiking club, there are often car-pool outings to more distant trails.

Talk the walk

Become a real trail booster by helping family, friends and others be aware of local trails and the benefits of trail use. Encourage them to take part in trail-based events like International Trails Day celebrations in June. Get involved in organizing local family fun events or by helping out with other activities like trail clearing. Join with other like-minded community members and speak out for improvements that make it easy to use local trails—including:

- posting clear signage at trail entrances
- advocating for more trails through urban areas and linked to bus routes
- and making trail maps easily accessible through local libraries, or on municipal websites.



Be active all year

Trails can be used year-round, for snowshoeing and cross-country skiing, mountain biking, horseback riding, running, orienteering and more.

Check out the following information sources for maps and events on Simcoe County trails:

- Simcoe County Trails – Ready to Explore at www.simcoecountytrails.net
- Central Ontario Geocachers www.centralontariocachers.com

You'll find links to some Muskoka trails at the following websites:

- Township of Muskoka Lakes at www.township.muskokalakes.on.ca. Look for the link from the home page to Community Information.
- Huntsville has five trails, including a wonderful new one along the waterfront. Go to www.town.huntsville.on.ca. Click on Residents, then Recreation, then Parks and Trails.
- Bracebridge parks and trails information can be accessed directly from their home page at www.town.bracebridge.on.ca.
- Gravenhurst has trails information at www.gravenhurst.ca. Look for the link to the recreation guide at the left-hand bottom of the page.



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