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When you take your helmet off, find a flat, secure place for it. You could set it on the ground, secure it on a rack, or stow it on a shelf. On some bikes, putting it on the fuel tank may expose it to fumes. If you place it on the seat, make sure it won’t fall off.

If you plan to use a CB radio when you ride, find a model that doesn’t require dril ling speaker holes in the outer shell. Before you purchase your speakers, check with your state’s laws regulating their use in your area. Any increase in noise level will impair hearing, so don’t use them unless the increase is not more than a few decibels. Most helmet manufacturers recommend replacing your helmet every two to four years. If you notice any signs of damage before then, replace it sooner.

Why replace your helmet every few years if it doesn’t appear damaged? Its protective qualities may deteriorate with time and wear. The chin strap may fray or loosen at its attaching points; the shell could be chipped or damaged. The best reason is that helmets keep improving. Changes are that the helmet you buy in a couple of years will be better—stronger, lighter, and more comfortable—than the one you own now. It might even cost less!

Can’t remember when you bought your present helmet? Check the chin strap or permanent labeling. Since 1974, all helmets must have the month and date of production stamped on it. If there’s no date at all, you should definitely replace your helmet—now!

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Reflectivity

Many states require a specific amount of retroreflective material on a helmet. Thoroughly read the manufacturer’s information. Your local motor-vehicle department can give you exact information on the location and number of square inches of retroreflective material required in your state.

Helmet Laws

Wearing a helmet properly strapped on your head is mandatory in most states. Laws are always changing, so double-check with the state department of motor vehicles in your state for the most current information. Are you planning a tour through several states? Plan to wear your helmet in all states, regardless, and remember that laws apply to travelers as well as residents. Don’t leave home without the information you need.

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A three-quarter, open-face helmet is also a choice of some riders. It is constructed with the same basic components, but does not offer the face and chin protection of full-face helmets. If you use an open-face helmet, you should have a snap-on face shield in place when you ride, or buy a pair of goggles that can withstand the impact of a stone or other debris. Prescription eyeglasses or sunglasses are not sufficient protection, and they might move or fly off.

A 'shorty' half-helmet protects even less of your head. It is more likely to come off your head upon impact. Therefore, 'shorty', half-shell helmets are not recommended.

Getting the Right Fit

Each organization has rigid procedures for testing:

- Impact – the shock-absorbing capacity of the helmet.
- Penetration – the helmet’s ability to withstand a blow from a sharp object.
- Retention – the chin strap’s ability to stay fastened without stretching or breaking.
- Periheral vision – the helmet must provide a minimum side vision of 105 degrees to each side. (Most people’s usable peripheral vision is only about 90 degrees to each side.)

Since 1980, all adult-sized helmets for on-highway use must meet DOT standards. Helmet dealers and distributors must ensure that all the helmets they sell bear the DOT sticker. Whatever your helmet choice, be sure it has this certification. You don’t want an inferior helmet, or one designed for another purpose. If someone tries to sell you one without it, don’t buy it. If your helmet has no DOT sticker, do not wear it, regardless of its age.

Snell has been testing helmets since the 1950s. The use of Snell standards by helmet manufacturers is voluntary. Unlike DOT standards, Snell testing is revised (most recently in 2000) as helmet design and technology improve.

Both agencies attempt to reproduce, under test conditions, the situations that are hazardous to motorcyclists. Their testing methods differ, but the intent is the same: to make certain any helmet they approve will not allow you one without it, don’t buy it. If your helmet has no DOT sticker, do not wear it, regardless of its age.

Since head injuries account for a majority of motorcycle fatalities, protection is vital. (Head injury was specified on 42 percent of the death certificates for motorcycle drivers and passengers in California in 1987-88; Romano PS, McLaughlin E. (1991). Helmet use and fatal motorcycle injuries in California, 1987-88. Journal of Head Trauma Rehabilitation. May 1991; 6(2):21-37.) Even the best helmet is no guarantee against injury. However, without a helmet you are more likely to have serious head injuries than a rider who is wearing one.

Rigidity outer shell
Impact-absorbing liner
Adhesive strip
Basic Construction

Protective/Comfort Attributes

Padding
Impact-absorbing liner
Face shield

Retention system

See and be seen. Be prepared. Enjoy the ride.

Helmet Care

Follow the manufacturer’s care instructions for your helmet. Use only the mildest soap recommended. Avoid any petroleum-based cleaning fluids, especially if you own a polycarbonate helmet. Exposure to strong cleaning agents can cause the helmet to decompose and lose protective value.

Keep your helmet’s face shield clean. Normally, mild soap and water with a soft cloth will do the job. If it gets scratched, replace it. A scratched face shield can be difficult to see through. At night, it could dangerously distort your vision and your view of oncoming lights.

A helmet looks tough and sturdy, but it should be handled as a fragile item. This means that you don’t want to drop your helmet onto hard surfaces. It could ruin your helmet. Remember that its function is to absorb impacts.
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Since 1980, all adult-sized helmets for on-highway use must meet DOT standards. Helmet dealers and distributors must ensure that all the helmets they sell bear the DOT sticker. Whatever your helmet is, you can use the chart above. Measure your head at its largest circumference – usually just above your eyebrows in front, over your eyes and around in back. Try it several times so you know you’ve gotten the largest number. If your head size falls between the numbers listed, use the larger size. Most helmets are marked as small, medium or large. You may need to contact the manufacturer for size equivalents. Helmet sizes vary among manufacturers and model types.

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If you plan to use a CB radio when you ride, find a model that doesn’t require drilling speaker holes in the outer shell. Before you purchase your speakers, check with your state’s laws regulating their use in motorcycles. Some states prohibit them.

Replacing Your Helmet

Replace your helmet if it was involved in a crash it probably absorbed some impact shock. Some helmet manufacturers will inspect and, where possible, repair a damaged helmet. If you drop your helmet and think it might be damaged, take advantage of this service.

Most helmet manufacturers recommend replacing your helmet every two to four years. If you notice any signs of damage before then, replace it sooner.

Why replace your helmet every few years if it doesn’t appear damaged? Its protective qualities may deteriorate with time and wear. The chin strap may fray or loosen at its attaching points; the shell could be chipped or damaged. The best reason is that helmets keep improving. Chances are that the helmet you buy in a couple of years will be better – stronger, lighter and more comfortable – than the one you own now. It might even cost less!

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While gathering information on protecting your head, why not get good tips on other personal protective gear? Read MSF’s Cycle Safety Information (CSI) sheet, “Personal Protective Gear for the Motorcyclist,” available from the MSF at no charge.

What You Should Know About Motorcycle Helmets

The Motorcycle Safety Foundation is a national, not-for-profit organization promoting the safety of motorcyclists with programs in rider training, operator licensing and public information. For the Basic or Experienced RiderCourse™ nearest you, call the national toll-free telephone number: (800) 446-9227. The MSF is sponsored by the U.S. distributors and manufacturers of BMW, Ducati, Harley-Davidson, Honda, Kawasaki, Piaggio/Vespa, Suzuki, Victory and Yamaha motorcycles.

The information contained in this publication is offered for the benefit of those who have an interest in riding motorcycles. The information has been compiled from publications, interviews and observations of individuals and organizations familiar with the use of motorcycles, accessories and training. Because there are many differences in product design, riding styles; and federal, state and local laws, there may be organizations that hold differing opinions. Consult your local regulatory agencies for information concerning the operation of motorcycles in your area. Although the Motorcycle Safety Foundation will continue to research, field test and publish responsible viewpoints on the subject, it disclaims any liability for the views expressed herein.

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What a Helmet Does for You

First, it is the best protective gear you can wear while riding a motorcycle. Think of it at the same time you think of your ignition key: Pick up the key; pick up the helmet. They go together. Helmet use is not a “cure-all” for motorcycle safety, but in a crash, a helmet can help protect your brain, your face, and your life.

Combined with other protective gear, rider-education courses, proper licensing and public awareness, the use of helmets and protective gear is one way to reduce injury.

You hope you never have to “use” your helmet, just like you hope you won’t ever need to “use” the seatbelt in your car. But crashes do happen. We can’t predict when or what kind they will be. You should not say to yourself, “I’m just running down to the store,” and not wear your helmet.

In any given year, a lot of people make good use of seatbelts, and a lot of riders give thanks that they were wearing helmets.

Second, a good helmet makes riding a motorcycle more fun, due to the comfort factor: another truth. It cuts down on wind noise roaring by your ears, on windblast on your face and eyes, and deflects bugs and other objects flying through the air. It even contributes to comfort from changing weather conditions and reduces rider fatigue.

Third, wearing a helmet shows that motorcyclists are responsible people; we take ourselves and motorcycling seriously. Wearing a helmet, no matter what the law says, is a projection of your attitude toward riding. And that attitude is plain to see by other riders and non-riders alike.

Helmet Work

Most activities have their own suitable protective gear and equipment. Motorcycle is no exception. Every rider and passenger should wear over-the-ankle footwear, long pants, a long-sleeved jacket, full-fingered motorcycle gloves, and a helmet manufactured to meet DOT (U.S. Department of Transportation) standards.

Helmet work. Helmet effectiveness has been confirmed by responsible studies, while helmet myths – “helmets break necks, block vision and impair hearing” – have been consistently disproved. Safety-conscious riders wear helmets by deliberate choice every time they ride; we know that we will, too.

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