

Does Your Riding Helmet Fit?

December 10, 1997

*Written by Dr. Paula Welton – Chairperson, Human Safety Committee
Nova Scotia Equestrian Federation*

Why do we wear riding helmets? Is it for style? Is it to comply with the CEF regulations? Or is it to protect our valuable but fragile brains? Obviously the latter should be the answer, but if your helmet does not fit properly, it may not be affording as much protection as it could.

Heads come in all shapes and sizes and so do riding helmets. The challenge is to match one to the other as perfectly as possible. The best way to ensure the fit is to try the helmet on and wear it around for several minutes in the shop. Since helmets vary in size and shape between manufacturers, several helmets may have to be tried so plan to spend quite some time at it and end up with "a bad hair day" as well as a great helmet.

Before even trying on the helmet, take time to read the label. It should be ASTM approved or have the SEI label. Both these indicate that the helmet meets a rigorous standard for safety under a variety of conditions. It should have a safety harness which is bolted to the helmet and it should fasten under the chin with a buckle, not a snap that can easily become undone in a fall. In addition, the harness should have a laced adjustment at the back to fit snugly under your occiput (bony part of the skull at the back of your head) to keep the helmet from sliding forward over your eyes.

Once you pick out a helmet that meets these criteria, and looks like it might be your size, try it on. It should fit snugly from front to back and from side to side, but not so tightly that it gives you a headache. A well fitted helmet should stay on your head when harnessed without rocking or moving around regardless what you are doing. In the shop, try bending over at the waist and shaking your head in that position. With the harness secured, the helmet should move very little. Then stand up and try to rock the helmet from front to back and from side to side. Your scalp and the skin on your forehead should move with the helmet.

If the helmet has a suspension inside - the four pieces of cloth joined by a lace in the center - it is to be used to adjust the fit of the helmet to keep it off the top of your ears. **It does not provide any safety protection.** If the harness is U shaped over the ears, be sure the U is flat, close to your head when the harness is snugly fastened to prevent rotation of the helmet when you receive a blow to the front or back of the helmet.

After wearing the helmet for about five minutes, take it off and look in a mirror. In addition to checking your hair, look for marks on your forehead. If there are marks, try the next bigger size.

Many helmets now come with "spacers", pieces of foam with sticky backs or velcro to fit inside the helmet, to help the helmet and your head fit together, so don't get discouraged. In addition, different manufacturers' helmets will fit differently even though the size on the label is the same. This, of course, makes helmet shopping through the mail haphazard at best.

One of the rules for protective headwear in any sport is that a helmet showing damage of any kind, or which has been through an accident severe enough to give you a headache should be inspected by the manufacturer for damage, or replaced. Not all helmet damage is easily seen or felt.

If your helmet doesn't fit properly or meet the criteria outlines above, you should seriously consider purchasing a new one. You may be reluctant to give up your well worn, "broken-in" old friend, or spend more of your hard earned and scarce dollars, but, in the long run, prevention of head injuries which can be devastating or even life threatening will make it well worth the expense.

Happy Shopping!