

Helmets must be part of skiing and snowboarding culture, doctors urge

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While the world's best skiers and snowboarders at the Vancouver 2010 Olympic Winter Games compete with helmets on, many other skiers and snowboarders are choosing to forego this important piece of safety equipment. In fact, many skiers and snowboarders place fashion before safety, according to a commentary by a St. Michael's Hospital neurosurgeon published in the *Journal of the American Medical Association* today.

The commentary calls for skiers to shun the cultural stigma or fashion faux pas associated with wearing helmets to encourage helmet use as a routine part of the ski and snowboard culture.

Head injuries in these two alpine sports are the most frequent cause of hospital admission and death. Research shows that about 120,000 people in North America suffer head injuries while skiing or snowboarding each year. Recent studies have shown that helmets help reduce the risk of head injuries by up to 60 percent.

"Despite compelling evidence that shows wearing a helmet significantly reduces the chance of head and brain injury, there are still those who argue that helmets are not fashionable or part of the ski culture," explains Dr. Michael Cusimano, a neurosurgeon at St. Michael's Hospital. "We have established the safety benefits but now we must find ways to integrate helmets so it becomes another piece of standard equipment for people on the slopes. It is time for everyone who has a stake in skiing and snowboarding to do their part to make the slopes

safer."

According to the authors, a shift in attitude toward helmet use is necessary to quash cultural stigmas. They say that change has already begun. For example, during the 2009 National Ski Safety Week, ski areas in California, Colorado and Washington offered discounts on helmets through the Lid for Kids safety awareness program. Other resorts are including a helmet with their child and youth ski and snowboard rental packages.

"Resorts have two reasons for promoting helmets - one, it keeps their customers safer and two, they are also seeing a discount in their insurance premiums when the slopes are safer places," says Dr. Cusimano. "Role modeling can also have a powerful effect on what people sense as normal. Ski patrollers and instructors understand that helmets lessen the risk of traumatic [brain injury](#) and view themselves as role models for the public; however, most do not wear helmets regularly."

The authors recommend:

- All ski and snowboard advertising images include people wearing helmets
- Public Service Announcements featuring well-known athletes promoting healthy physical activity
- Parents wearing helmets to promote the practice with their kids
- Formal instruction aimed at ski resorts, schools and novice skiers offered through groups such as, Think First and the National Ski Areas Association, need to be included in any campaign to make

the slopes safer.

"We are on the brink of changing the culture in skiing and snowboarding towards [helmets](#)," he says. "What we need is action by various stakeholders so wearing a helmet no longer becomes a fashion decision but rather common sense. We need action from national organizations, to ski resorts and schools, to parents and kids to make this culture shift. At that point, we will make real progress in reducing the number of [head injuries](#) on the slopes."

Provided by St. Michael's Hospital

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