

EDITOR'S MESSAGE

Spring is slowly beginning to win the battle against Jack Frost, and soon the number of cyclists on the roads will begin to increase.

Since 1997, Nova Scotia has legally required cyclists of all ages to wear a helmet. There is a large body of research that shows wearing a helmet while cycling, in addition to many other activities including contact sports, horse riding, roller-skating and skateboarding, reduces the severity and incidence of injury. Therefore, mandating the use of helmets while cycling would be protective.¹ However, it should be noted that while helmet use does decrease injury rates, especially head trauma, some research has shown that mandated helmet use decreases the number of cyclists in general.² In a time with sky-rocketing rates of obesity and sedentary lifestyles—and the associated health care costs—any legislation that potentially discourages physical activity should not be passed without thoughtful discussion.

There are many reasons, both actual and theoretical, as to why mandated helmet use ends up turning people away from cycling. Ross et al.³ looked into this and found these reasons could be grouped into several categories. These included perceived exemption from danger (I don't cycle fast enough to be injured or since I've been a cyclist for so long I can avoid accidents), cost barriers (helmets are too expensive or they're not a good way to spend money), whether or not they've been told personally about the safety of helmets, and vanity and discomfort barriers. These barriers, and others reported in the study, show that tackling public conceptions about helmet use requires more than one approach.

A category responsible for one of the bigger gaps between helmet wearers and non-wearers was that of personal vanity and discomfort. Foreseeable responses included: wearing a helmet is embarrassing, makes you feel stupid, and makes you look foolish. But it also included that helmets are too hot to wear comfortably, the straps can pinch and irritate skin and the wearer can even feel like they're being choked.

Until recently all helmets were pretty much the same – plastic and foam buckets that sat on top of your head with straps snapped together under your chin to keep it in place. Even when it was designed to look like a hat and not a helmet, it was still a traditional helmet underneath.

Hövding is the product of a Swedish company by the same name that formed in 2006 with the goal of reinventing the helmet as an airbag. Hövding is a collar

that zips on around the neck. Upon impact, the airbag hidden within the collar inflates in less than a second to form a large cushioned hood to protect your head and minimize injury. This helmet addresses some of the concerns of helmet non-wearers: your head won't get too hot, straps won't irritate your skin and the collar is minimally noticeable from a distance. This innovative 'helmet' has to be seen to be believed; you can see videos of it at work at www.hovding.com.

It should be said that there hasn't been any third-party research about the safety of Hövding yet, or how it compares to traditional helmets in accidents. Hövding has been on sale in Europe for over a year. Hövding has CE marking – meaning it meets required safety legislation to be sold within Europe. In Canada, bicycle helmets need to have at least one of four safety certifications and so far Hövding has none of them. This means that right now if a cyclist in Canada were stopped for not wearing a helmet, but was wearing a Hövding, they would still be fined \$143.27. Hövding has said they are going to be looking into Canadian certification in the next year.

To most, it probably seems the debate of helmet use while cycling was settled 15 years ago when Nova Scotia, like four other provinces in the country, made it mandatory. But research shows that with helmet legislation comes drops in cyclist numbers. People turning away from cycling means people turning away from a healthy, sustainable and environmentally-friendly mode of transport. Research shows a variety of reasons turn people away from helmets, with perhaps the most obvious one being appearance and comfort. One company looked at the problem of cyclist safety in a whole new way, airbags vs. helmets, in order to tackle one of the leading deterrents of helmet use. If Hövding, or any new helmet design, is approved for Canadian streets it could increase the number of cyclists, and increasing the physical activity of Canadians is an outcome we should all be working towards.

*Regards,
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Editor in Chief*

References

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