How to Select and Fit A Bicycle Helmet

Increase safety and comfort by wearing the right helmet!
Ken Hart

Selecting the Proper Helmet

Does the helmet meet the safety standard?
Look for a sticker on the inside lining of the helmet that says it meets one of the recognized safety standards. Stickers that have CE, CPSC, ASTM, ANSI, or Snell ratings are all examples of safety standards.

Does the helmet fit?
Helmets come in a variety of sizes, typically, from Small to Extra Large. Have the athlete try on the helmet. A helmet should fit comfortably and not pinch. Look for the smallest sized helmet that will fit. Although you can make a larger helmet fit by adding extra sizing pads, the amount of protection is diminished when this is done.

Helmets also come in a variety of shapes. There are models that are narrow, and models that are more round in shape. Choose a helmet that is comfortably touching the head all the way around, is level, and stable enough to stay in place when shaken or tugged upon. The fit can be fine-tuned with foam pads included with the helmet.

Some helmet companies make a women's specific helmet. These tend to be slightly smaller and often times are designed with a cutout to allow a ponytail to comfortably exit the rear of the helmet.

Does the helmet have adequate ventilation?
Bicyclists are their own engines, and as such, produce heat during exercise. A lot of this heat radiates out through the head. As a result, helmet ventilation is important, especially on long rides or hot days. It is possible to get overheated and/or dehydrated while riding in the summer heat with a poorly ventilated helmet.

For this reason, bicyclists who do more than neighborhood riding should look closely at how well a helmet cools. All helmets have slots or holes in them to let air flow through. Although the number of openings in the helmet may be a sales point, it is mostly the size of the front vents that allow air to flow through the helmet to cool the rider.

Get a helmet designed specifically for road cycling, and not for BMX or skating. These helmets have minimal cooling vents. Helmets designed for BMX or skate helmets don't seem to care about sweaty heads. These helmets are often considered to be "in-style", but for road cycling, an adequate number of front vents are needed to permit airflow. Look for a cycling helmet with multiple air vents and padding designed to absorb perspiration. If your athlete perspires a lot, look for a helmet with removable pads, so that they can be removed and washed. Helmets with good ventilation can actually be cooler than riding with no helmet at all. More vents usually mean a higher priced helmet.

Does the athlete like the helmet?
It is a lot easier to get an athlete to wear a helmet if they like it, and helped select it. Although a helmet may have a high safety rating, if the athlete does not like the helmet, or thinks it to be nerdy, they may rebel against wearing it.

Buy using modern materials and designs, helmets now look great, feel light, are cooler, and protect better than ever! They come in all sorts of fashion colors with great looking covers and graphics. And there's a style to suit nearly everyone. Let the athlete add stickers, or personalize their helmets.

Encourage others to wear helmets, and praise helmet wear as appropriate. You yourself should be a role model, wearing a helmet, and following the same rules that you enforce with your athletes.

Fitting Your Athlete's Helmet

1 First, get the right sized helmet

The helmet should fit comfortably and not pinch. The helmet should be as low on the head as possible, and not sitting “on top” of the head. It should be low on the forehead, but not impeding vision, and be level on the head, using the straps, fitting pads, and fit ring to ensure a snug, comfortable fit. The helmet should not slip, and should not rock on the head, in any direction, either from side-to-side or front-to-back.

Be Prepared for the Worst. Heads come in many sizes and shapes. You should be prepared for the possibility that the helmet you are trying to fit may not be compatible with your particular athlete’s head. And, you should expect to spend ten to fifteen minutes to get your helmet properly fitted. Also some hairstyles, such as Dreadlock, corn-rows, weaves, or beading can make it very difficult to size a helmet. You may need to remind athletes of the rule: ”No Helmet, No Ride”.

2 Adjust the fit pads or ring

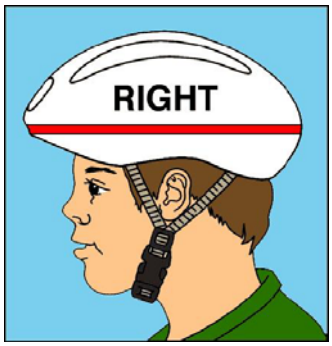
Most helmets come with an assortment of different sized foam pads. These are used to "fine tune" the helmet's fit to the shape of your head.

There are also helmets on the market that use a fitting ring (Often called a “Roc-Lock”), in conjunction with fit pads for adjustment. These rings may be Velcro or plastic. With these one-size-fits-all models you begin by adjusting the size of the ring first, making the helmet feel more stable. Make sure that the stabilizer is snug, but not too tight.

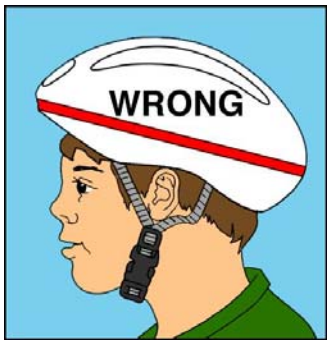
For helmets that sit too tall on an athlete’s head, you can often remove the top pad entirely, or use the thinnest pads from within the helmet. This lowers the helmet on the head, bringing its protection further down the sides of the helmet. This might reduce the flow of cooling air slightly, but usually not enough to notice.

If the athlete’s head is narrow, there may be gaps on the side of the helmet, adjust the side fit pads by using thicker pads. If your head is wider than it is long, place the thicker pads in the back of the helmet. You may also move pads around, particularly on the "corners" in the front and rear. Leaving some gaps will improve airflow through the helmet.

The pads should touch your head evenly all the way around, without making the fit too tight. The pads may compress slightly over time, but not much, so do not count on that to loosen the fit. The helmet should sit level on the head, with the front just above the eyebrows, or if the rider uses glasses, just above the frame of the glasses. If you walk into a wall, the helmet should hit before your nose does!



Remember: Helmet is level
Y Fitting just below ear



No Loose Straps,
or worn on back of Head

Should be snug, and
move skin when twisted

3 Adjust the straps

Adjust the chinstrap to approximately the right fit. Put the helmet on and fasten the buckle. Be sure the front is in front! Sometimes using a sticker can be a great reminder as to the front or back of the helmet.

With the helmet in position on your head, adjust the straps to place the Y fitting, where the straps come together, just under your ear. That may involve sliding the straps across the top of the helmet to get the length even on both sides. You want there to be no extra or loose straps above the Y fitting.

Then adjust the length of the chinstrap so it is comfortably snug. If it cuts into the chin and is not comfortable, it is too tight. Make sure that the “Y” joint is not too low, or on the boney part of the jaw. You should be able to place 2 fingers between the chinstrap and chin when the mouth is closed and the chin is extended forward.

Strap adjustments should make the helmet fit snugly but not uncomfortably tight. It should be as low on the head as possible to maximize side coverage, without impeding vision and held level on the head with the strap comfortably snug, and shouldn't rock from side to side or front to back.

4 Test the Fit

When you think the straps are about right, move the helmet side-to-side and front to back, watching the skin around the eyebrows. It should move slightly with the helmet. If it does not, the fit pads are probably too small in front or back. . The front edge of the helmet should not be more than 1 to 2 finger-widths from your eyebrows.

Put your palm under the front edge and push up and back. Can you move the helmet more than an inch or so from level, exposing your bare forehead? If yes, then you need to tighten the strap in front of your ear, and perhaps loosen the rear strap behind your ear. Make sure chinstrap is snug. If this doesn’t work, the helmet may be too big.

Open your mouth (lower jaw) as wide as possible, without moving your head. The top of your helmet should pull down slightly. If it does not, tighten the chinstrap. Make sure the front and back strap junction is under each ear, or with 2 fingers between the chin and strap when mouth is closed

Next, reach back and grab the back edge lower edge of the helmet and pull up. Does the helmet more than an inch? If so, tighten the rear straps. Make sure chinstrap is snug. If this doesn’t work, the helmet may be too big.

When you are done, your helmet should be level, feel solid on your head and be comfortable. It should not bump on your glasses (if it does, tighten the rear straps). You should forget you are wearing it most of the time. If it still does not fit that way, keep working with the straps and pads, or try another, different helmet.

Finally, you want the straps to stay adjusted. Some helmets--even expensive ones--do not have locking pieces on the side where the straps come together under your ear. If you can move the side buckle with your hand, it will migrate in use. We call that "strap creep," and can be a major problem. You should put on a rubber band and snug it up under the side buckle when you have the fit just right. **All Done!**

Taking Care of Your Helmet

1. Teach the athlete how to use the helmet. Have the athlete practice using the buckle until they are comfortable with it. Pulling on the straps to remove the helmet will change the adjustments, and oftentimes break the buckle.

2. Hats and Hairdo’s can change the fit. Since the helmet should have a snug fit, wearing a sweatband or do-rag on a hot day; or a knit cap on a cool day, will make the helmet fit too tightly. Readjust the straps and pads for these situations. Some hairstyles such as beading or dreadlocks will alter helmet fit, too.

3. Be careful using paint on a helmet. Some paints and solvents can damage a bicycle helmet. Don't use anything on it unless you are sure it's safe. Some bike shops sell stickers that are safe on helmets. Check them out!

4. Clean the helmet with gentle soap and warm water. A helmet gets dirty over time and it's nice to clean it up. But don't use solvents or cleansers! These can damage the helmet, even though the damage might not be visible. Hand soap or dishwashing liquids are fine. The pads can be taken out and rinsed with soap and water, too.

5. Treat a helmet with respect and care. While it is made to take knocks, excessive abuse can damage it. It's best not to waste its strength by tossing it around or kicking it.

6. Replace the helmet when appropriate. Remember: helmets aren't forever. Since a helmet uses itself up saving your athlete’s life, it needs to be replaced after a crash. You may not even be able to see the damage but it's better to be safe than sorry. Normal wear and tear, plus sweat will also slowly wear-out the helmet. Typical life of a helmet is 2-4 years.