

While Skiing and Riding, Protect your Head at All Times: No More Excuses!

Welcome to the [PHAT](#) (Protect your Head at All Times) blog for the ski season 2010-2011. In this blog we will try to provide honest answers about the benefits (and limitations) of ski helmets. PHAT can provide honest answers about head injuries and skiing because it is a completely independent organization *without any sponsorship by helmet companies* (who would obviously like to sell lots of helmets) or the ski industry.

We believe that skiing and snowboarding are very safe sports that have numerous benefits. That said, all outdoor activities have some inherent risks that we should attempt to minimize wherever possible. Unfortunately, when it comes to ski helmets there has been lots of misinformation and bad science out there for some time. Over the past few years there have been increasing numbers of well-controlled studies that indicate ski helmets have an important role to play in reducing the chance of a head injury or death while on the slopes. We will look at these studies and answer other questions in the days ahead. For the moment though let me summarize the medical information as we know it:

- Helmets are a good thing.
- There are absolutely no downsides to wearing a helmet.

There, that wasn't so hard was it? The somewhat longer version of the medical information follows:

- Helmets appear to prevent about 40-60% of head injuries.
- They don't cause neck injuries.
- They don't make people ski and ride more recklessly.

We can answer questions about how we can prove the above statements, however let me give you another perspective. The following letter was written to us by a young skier named Brian. Brian had visited Smugglers Notch (where the PHAT program has been based) and later wrote us this letter. Brian and his family gave us permission to reprint his letter. The words speak for themselves:

Last night I witnessed a snowboarder die on the mountain at Bristol Mountain in Rochester, New York. He wasn't wearing a helmet, caught an edge and somersaulted into a group of trees. I was the only other one on the mountain and had to go down to get a patroller. It was a life changing event. I never used to wear a helmet and the only reason I wear one now is seriously because of the really cool look of your SKI PHAT sticker that I got only a week before when I took my vacation to Smuggs where my father made me buy a helmet and the ski phat sticker was the only real reason why I would wear it. Now I know that I will be skiing phat for the rest of my life. I was wondering if there was anything I can do here in Rochester to spread the idea of skiing PHAT because I would never want this to happen to anyone ever again. I was hoping you can send some stickers or brochures to me so I can hand them out to my friends who currently don't wear helmets or the brochures I can put in the mountain or at the local ski

store where everyone in my family worked. Thank you! for providing the dope stickers and I hope to hear from you soon. Brian Kelly

There is a reason why docs are passionate about promoting helmets. Unfortunately we sometimes have to deal with the results of head trauma on the slopes. To be blunt, head injuries suck. Skiers and riders do die of head injuries on the slopes. And sometimes, the end result of a head injury can be even worse.

Skiing and riding are great sports. Our country is in the midst of an epidemic of obesity. We should do everything we can to promote all kinds of outdoor recreation, particularly in the winter months when people tend to not get outside as much.

A day on the slopes is far better (and in the long run safer) than a day at the mall or in front of the TV. That said, if we can reduce the risks of a head injury with a simple intervention, why not do it? If everyone simply wore a helmet while skiing, we could prevent *tens of thousands* of head injuries a year. That really is a no-brainer.

Robert K. Williams, MD is a pediatric anesthesiologist and critical care specialist at Vermont Children's Hospital at Fletcher Allen and a longtime skier and snowboarder. He created the PHAT helmet advocacy program in 2002.

To learn more about PHAT, visit: <http://www.skihelmetsafety.org/>.