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Ski helmet use on the rise

Vermont doctor encourages use in PHAT program

By Dan McLean, Free Press Staff Writer

Nancy Cutting has three children, 10 to 18 years old, and they always wear ski helmets, she says — “Always.” As she shopped Wednesday afternoon at Skirack in downtown Burlington, she said, “It’s become a habit for these kids to put a helmet on. It’s all they know.”

Helmets are becoming increasingly common on the slopes, both in Vermont and throughout the country. This week, the National Ski Patrol embraced a helmet initiative with Vermont roots, and the National Ski Areas Association is developing a program to encourage those younger than 14 to wear helmets by 2012.

“They are wonderful,” said Bill Stenger, co-owner and president of Jay Peak Resort, referring to protective headgear. Three years ago, the northern Vermont resort mandated employees wear helmets, he said. All ski school participants also must wear a helmet.

“We try to set a tone in policy that enforces and promotes wearing a helmet,” Stenger said. “They are wonderful for two reasons: They protect the skier and rider, if they do have a collision, and they are warm.”

Because of the prevalence of glade skiing at Jay Peak, “logic and common sense” compel about 85 percent of people there to wear a helmet, Stenger said. That, he said, is a “remarkable increase” from five or 10 years ago.

After decades of skiing helmetless, Stenger changed course about seven years ago to persuade his three grandchildren they should wear helmets, too. “It’s hard to tell them to do something if you aren’t willing to do it,” he said.

Helmet use is getting some high-profile endorsements. The National Ski Patrol has joined an initiative by a Fletcher Allen Health Care doctor called Protect Head at All Times, or PHAT. The program — which encourages helmet use through example, not mandatory use — has been running a pilot program at Smugglers’ Notch Resort in Cambridge. The National Ski Patrol’s involvement is expected to help the program catch on at resorts throughout the country.

“We are really pleased with this. This is potentially a game-changer,” said Robert Williams, a pediatric anesthesiologist at Vermont Children’s Hospital at Fletcher Allen, who is spearheading the program.

In addition to developing PHAT, Williams has documented the rapid increase of helmet use at Smuggs. During the first year of his study, the winter of 2002-03, he found that fewer than half of skiers and snowboarders at Smuggs — 44 percent — wore helmets. That increased to 73 percent last winter, he said.



University of Vermont freshman Jason Hylton, 19, tries on helmets with the help of Will Skolochenko at the Ski Rack in Burlington on Wednesday. Helmet use is rising in Vermont and the nation.

Last year, nearly nine of 10 riders younger than 18 wore a helmet at Smugglers' Notch, said Williams, who is also an associate professor at the University of Vermont's College of Medicine. About six in 10 adults wore a helmet. Williams declined to release the comparable data from earlier winters until he published the results of his study.

The group that is most difficult to persuade to wear helmets, he said, is 15- to 30-year-old males who do not have season passes, Williams said. In its own study, the National Ski Areas Association found that one-third, or 32 percent, of those from 18 to 24 years old wear helmets while skiing or snowboarding. That's a marked increase from 18 percent in 2002-03. Those 9 years old and younger register the highest percentage of helmet use, 77 percent, the association found in its study last year of 130,000 riders nationwide.

Matt Manser, the alpine hard goods buyer at Skirack, said there were twice as many helmet sales this October compared with October 2008. "That's huge for us," he said, adding November's sales represented an increase, too.

"It's a safety feature, but it's also warmer. That's why a lot of people get into it," he said. The helmets cost \$60 to more than \$300. "You wear a helmet not because you are crazy, but because someone can run into you."

The U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission determined that nearly 8,000 head injuries each year could be prevented if all skiers and snowboarders wore helmets. Williams says that translates into 650 to 700 preventable head injuries in Vermont alone.

Smugglers' Notch doesn't require visitors or employees to wear helmets, but the employee policy is reconsidered annually, and the resort "highly encourages" helmet use, said Barbara Thomke, a resort spokeswoman.

Williams is pleased the level of overall helmet use at Smugglers' rose to three-quarters, but he isn't sure if the level has topped out. There was a slight dip from overall helmet use from 2007-08 to last winter, he noted. "We're not sure if that's a statistical quirk or if we have reached the limit," he said.

Williams is not advocating for changes in state law to compel full helmet use. "We can get a much higher use through viral use than plodding through state legislatures," he said.

More research will be conducted at the Vermont resort this year, he said.

The studies have cost more than \$100,000, Williams said. The money has come through a variety of grants. There has been no funding from the helmet industry, he said.

Williams is lukewarm on the National Ski Areas Association call for all skiers and boarders 14 and under to wear helmets by 2012. The Lakewood, Colo.,-based trade association represents 326 resorts.

"I endorse the idea, but I think we should get everybody into helmets and forget the ages," Williams said. "I don't really want this to be youth-orientated campaign. I want this aimed at everyone. I don't want kids to feel that you have to be in a helmet, and when you are older you can take the helmets off."

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Additional Facts

HELMET USE MORE COMMON

The percentage of skiers and boarders who wear helmets is rising. The figures for the 2008-09 ski and ride season:

NATIONALLY

- 48 percent, up from 43 percent the previous year and 25 percent in 2002-2003.
- 77 percent of children 9 or younger wear ski helmets.
- 66 percent of children between 10 and 14 wear ski helmets.
- 32 percent of those 18 to 24 wear ski helmets.

SMUGGLERS' NOTCH RESORT

- 73 percent, up from 44 percent in 2002-2003.

Source: National Ski Areas Association; Vermont Children's Hospital at Fletcher Allen