



Hitting the slopes? Why doctors say you need a helmet

*By Bridget Barry Caswell
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The cold and snow are on the way, soon to be followed by millions of skiers and snowboarders anxious to visit one of Vermont's 18 alpine resorts. The state hosts more than 4 million skiers and snowboarders each year. But research shows about 40 percent of those people still don't wear helmets despite medical data that shows they save lives.

"Every head injury we can prevent, even if it's quote-unquote 'just a concussion,' which is really old thinking--concussions, more important things such as skull fractures and severe head injuries are all things we know we can either eliminate or reduce the severity of by having people just wear a helmet," said Dr. Rob Williams of Fletcher Allen Health Care.

Williams is a pediatric anesthesiologist and the founder of the advocacy group known as PHAT-- Protect Your Head At All Times.

"To be honest, the reason I'm involved is I'm a doctor that has to treat head injuries and anything I can do to prevent head injuries is much better than trying to treat head injuries. Head injuries are forever," Williams said.

Williams says even a minor fall, off trail or on, can cause one of those catastrophic life-long head injuries. And while it appears that most young children don helmets, it's often risk-taking young males and adults who don't heed the warnings.

"There is absolutely no downside to wearing a helmet," Williams said. "There's a lot of old mythology that in the medical literature anyway has been debunked for a long time. Ski helmets don't make you ski faster, they don't give you neck injuries and they do anything, but protect your head."

Of particular concern for Williams, are those in uniform at ski resorts around the country. He believes the ski industry should be promoting helmet use by requiring or at least encouraging ski instructors and members of the ski patrol to all wear helmets. He says those people serve as role models for the skiing public.

"Unfortunately as a state to look around we've seen a couple of our Vermont resorts now actually more of the general public wearing ski helmets than the ski patrol and that's something, I think there's a message that we need to get out there and try to correct," he said.

So he's looking to the nation's ski industry to step up to the plate.

"In terms of the ski area employees what we find is that all of the ski areas, usage by employees whether it's in the ski school or the ski patrol, the vast majority of those employees are already wearing helmets," said Parker Riehle of the Vermont Ski Areas Association. "Some ski areas are moving toward mandatory policies for their

employees or for certain school programs, certainly youth group involvement in the ski schools have to wear helmets, but that really varies from resort to resort."

Both men don't believe in laws mandating helmet usage, although some states are passing those measures. Williams says it's a matter of personal responsibility for all to be smart by Protecting Your Head At All Times.

New Jersey just became the first state in the nation to pass a mandatory helmet law for skiers and snowboarders under age 18. California passed a similar bill earlier this year, but it was ultimately vetoed by the state's governor.