


HELMET HELP

Choosing the Proper Protection



HELMET TIPS



Probably no other piece of motorcycle gear gets more use than a good helmet.

So it makes sense to be sure you have the best helmet for your type of riding and that the fit, features and available accessories meet your needs.

The American Motorcyclist Association, as part of a comprehensive motorcycle safety program to help reduce injuries and fatalities in the event of a motorcycle crash, strongly encourages the use of personal protective equipment, including gloves, sturdy footwear and a properly fitted motorcycle helmet certified by its manufacturer to meet the DOT standard.

A helmet is a three- to five-year purchase, so be sure you make the right choice and come away from the transaction happy.

Here are some tips for picking the right helmet and getting the most out of the one you choose.



GET THE RIGHT FIT

A helmet that fits too tightly will quickly spoil a ride. Padding that squeezes your face or digs into your forehead diverts your attention from traffic or trails. After a while, tight helmets can cause fatigue and headaches, forcing you to cut short your ride.

At the same time, helmets that are too loose can rattle around in windy conditions or on bumpy roads or trails and could actually come off in a crash, leaving you with no head protection at all.

Shape: To get a helmet that fits properly, plan to visit some retailers and try on several helmet models.

Helmets, like heads, come in all shapes and sizes. Most motorcycle helmets fall into one of two categories, round or oblong. Pick the style that more closely matches the shape of your head.

Size: To find the right size helmet, start with the size you currently own or use a tape measure to check the circumference of your head just above the eyebrows.

But don't get locked into the numbers or the size on the tag in your current helmet.

Manufacturers make many models of helmets that have small differences in shape and size. The only way to properly test the fit is to put the helmet on and fasten the chin strap.

If you feel uncomfortable pressure, try a larger size.

Grab the helmet with both hands and hold it still, then shake your head from side to side and nod up and down. If your head moves around inside the helmet, try a smaller size.

Often, the fit around the face can be adjusted with different-size cheek pads.

Final check: Once you find a helmet that feels right, find a mirror and take a look. The goal is to have your eyes centered in the eye port. If your eyes sit too low, the helmet is too small; too high, and the helmet is too large.

Start over every time: Your head can change. And your hair style almost certainly does, over time. But the formula for finding the right helmet stays the same.

So, with each helmet purchase, start from scratch and follow the process outlined above.

Don't compromise. And don't take shortcuts. The outcome is too important.



ACCESSORIES TO CONSIDER

As with many things in life, accessorizing can help enhance the experience. Here are a few options to consider for your new helmet.

Communications: For many riders, the experience is better when it is shared.

Modern Bluetooth communications systems, such as the Cardo Scala Rider Packtalk or the Sena 20S, offer easy options for talking with a passenger or a group of fellow riders.

Installation and setup is pretty straightforward. And, once installed, these systems also allow riders to listen to music, talk on a cell phone (where legal) and hear GPS voice directions.

Some riders like to record their experiences with a camera that attaches to the helmet, such as the GoPro Hero. After a ride, motorcyclists download and edit their videos, then post them on Facebook, YouTube and other social media sites.

Protection: Specially designed bags and hangars and motorcycle top cases can protect your investment by keeping the helmet out of the elements when it's not on your head. Keeping a helmet properly stowed, at home or on the road, minimizes the risk of dings and scratches. Protecting the helmet preserves its finish and helps extend its life.

Security: Carrying your helmet around with you is a hassle, whether you are at a rally, a restaurant, the beach or elsewhere.

Motorcycle manufacturers and aftermarket companies provide a broad range of options for keeping your helmet secure.

Cable locks, carabiners, lock straps and handlebar helmet locks provide varying degrees of security when you leave your helmet with your bike. Locking top cases not only provide security, but also hide your helmet from would-be thieves.

Convenience and style: Many motorcyclists like to use tinted face shields for daytime riding, then switch to a clear shield as the sun begins to set. Nowadays, some companies offer face shields that automatically change to suit the lighting. Bell Transitions Photochromic Shield, for example, tints automatically, is clear at night and in low light conditions, and comes with anti-fog treatment and UV protection.

Another way to keep the sun out of your eyes while riding is a visor, such as those from Super-Visor, that attaches to the outside of the helmet. But several manufacturers now install retractable sun visors inside their helmets, allowing riders to flip a tinted shield up or down, as needed.

And, for comfort, helmet liners can provide additional cushioning for the head and wick away moisture.

HELMET CARE

Once you have the proper fit and accessories, the next step is ensuring you get the most out of your investment by taking proper care of your new helmet.

And proper care is all about cleaning and maintaining it.

Get the bugs off: The first step in cleaning a motorcycle helmet is getting rid of the smashed bug collection from your last ride. Scraping them off dry could result in a scratched helmet.

Try soaking a towel in warm water and placing it across the front of the helmet. Leave it in place for about 20 minutes. Soaking softens the residue on the helmet and face shield, making removal much easier.

Keep it clean: Modern helmet shells are made of a variety of materials, including carbon fiber, fiberglass and others.

Manufacturers recommend using plastic cleaner, such as Plexus Plastic Cleaner Protectant Polish, to clean the shell.

For helmets with a matte finish, use mild soap and water, and avoid waxes or polishes.

Dry the helmet with a soft cotton cloth that won't scratch the surface.



Cleaning the insides: If your helmet has a removable comfort liner, remove it. If the manufacturer's instructions allow it, tossing the liner into the washing machine and running it through a gentle cycle is the quickest and most thorough way to get it clean.

If the comfort liner is not removable, dampen a cloth, apply some soap and press the cloth against the liner to clean it. Pressing is better than rubbing or scrubbing, because it preserves the surface of the liner.

Whichever cleaning method you use, gently squeeze out the moisture, then let the liner air dry, preferably in the sunshine.



READY FOR A NEW HELMET?

If you keep your helmet clean and well maintained, it may not show signs of wear and tear, even though its useful life may be waning.

The five-year

rule: Replacing your helmet at least every five years is a recommendation based on a consensus of helmet manufacturers and the Snell Memorial Foundation.



Snell's website explains: "Glues, resins and other materials used in helmet production can affect liner materials. Hair oils, body fluids and cosmetics, as well as normal 'wear and tear' all contribute to helmet degradation. Petroleum based products present in cleaners, paints, fuels and other commonly encountered materials may also degrade materials used in many helmets possibly degrading performance.

"Additionally, experience indicates there will be a noticeable improvement in the protective characteristic of helmets over a five-year period due to advances in materials, designs, production methods and the standards. Thus, the recommendation for five-year helmet replacement is a judgment call stemming from a prudent safety philosophy."

Nicks, dings and drops: Check your helmet regularly for nicks, dings or cracks. These can

be signs of a loss of structural integrity.

Likewise, if you drop your helmet onto a hard surface, it probably is a good idea to replace it.

"It can be difficult to readily determine if a helmet has been damaged and the protective capabilities compromised without a thorough inspection by a trained professional," according to Snell. "Some manufacturers may provide this service or direct you to others that can perform these inspections."

Protecting the liner: The protective liner inside the motorcycle helmet provides the impact absorption that helps keep your head from harm. The protective liner absorbs the impact by compressing. So, it is important that you do not "pre-compress" this liner by hanging your helmet atop a mirror or sissy bar.

Likewise, resting the helmet on the gas tank can expose the liner to vapors that degrade the liner materials, reducing their shock-absorbing capabilities.

Checking the chin strap: Watch for signs of fraying or other damage to the chin strap. Any problem should be reported to the manufacturer or the retailer who sold you the helmet. A failed chin strap could result in the loss of your helmet in a crash or a fall.