

Helmet wars

A High Court judge has reignited the debate over whether to buckle up by saying cyclists who don't wear headgear are to blame for their own injuries. So which side are you on?

HATS OFF

DEBORAH MABY says the benefits of not wearing a helmet outweigh the risks

I ADMIT it: the main reason I don't wear a cycle helmet is that it makes my hair look horrible (I understand Boris Johnson has the same problem). "You won't care what your hair looks like when you're lying in a coma," a colleague often tells me — and you can't argue with that.

Yet I also wonder why should I have to wear a helmet to protect myself from bad drivers? What's more, many experts argue that increasing your own safety simply makes you drive or cycle more recklessly. Professor of Sustainable Transport John Whitelegg has joked that rather than airbags, cars need a big sharp spike sticking out of the centre of the steering wheel: just imagine how carefully everyone would drive then. The same could be said for cycling without a helmet.

Everyone who cycles cites Holland as the ideal — and the most noticeable thing there is how ordinary all cyclists look. There's no Lycra, no trendy expensive gear. You see young women trundling along with a baby in a sling on their front, a toddler in a seat on the back, and not a helmet in sight. Old men wobble down the road with a box of groceries on their handlebars; nobody glares at them. Cycling is not perceived as some dangerous activity that you have to dress for as if going into battle.

We're not Holland. But I think we have to change London's cycling environment for the better. The only way to make cycling safer is to increase the number of cyclists on the roads — and the sad truth is that making people wear helmets puts them off getting on a bike at all.

The first helmet legislation, in Australia in 1991, caused a drop in

the number of head injuries — but in the numbers cycling, too. If instead you encourage more people on to two wheels, the public health benefits — less obesity, fewer heart attacks — would probably outweigh the few injuries the helmets save.

Why should cyclists be singled out over helmets when pedestrians are even more prone to injury? The Cyclists' Touring Club is against helmet laws for any age group, as are all other cycling organisations in Britain. If it's good enough for them, it's good enough for me. I'll take the risk of not wearing a helmet — and that way I won't run the even greater risk of helmet hair.

Deborah Maby cycles a daily round trip of 12 miles between Holloway and Kensington.



'The only way to make cycling safer is to increase the number of cyclists on the roads'

'LET THE CYCLIST DECIDE'

THE EXPERT'S SAY...

"My children refuse to wear helmets. I would prefer them to ride without than not cycle at all because the benefits from the exercise far outweigh any risks that would be mitigated by a helmet." Dr Mark Porter, GP

"We believe people should choose whether or not to wear helmets. They should be fully informed of the possible

limits to their effectiveness." Charlie Lloyd, Cycling Development Officer, London Cycling Campaign

"We should be allowed, in our muddled way, to make up our own minds. The important thing is that we assess the risk, we make the decision, and be it on our own heads — or, in the case of my helmet, sometimes not." Boris Johnson, Mayor of London, 2008

SAFETY STATISTICS

The average cyclist would have to pedal the roads for more than 3,000 years to suffer a serious head injury, according to the Bicycle Helmet Research Foundation.
Children are 10 times more likely to suffer a head injury as a pedestrian than when they are on their bikes.

Results from the most recent government survey in 2006 showed that 27 per cent of people outside London wear helmets compared with 60 per cent in the city.
According to the LCC, more than half of cycle crashes are with HGVs and there is little anyone can do to protect themselves in those circumstances.

FIVE OF THE BEST

Londoners may be split over them, but one thing's for sure: the range of cycle helmets has never been funkier

PERFORMANCE Giro Ionos: This top-of-the-range road helmet is designed for the serious rider. With the largest air vents ever carved into a helmet it will keep you super-cool while on the road. £159.99 from Her Gear, 19 Abingdon Road, W8 (020 7376 2225)



STYLE

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FEMININE

Sawako Furuno Sakura: Sawako's answer to women's helmet-fear was to create something prettier and more feminine. Her girlish designs are stencilled onto BMX-style helmets. £60 from Cycle Chic (020 7613 7316, www.cyclechic.co.uk)



LIGHTWEIGHT Specialized S-Works 2D 04W: The lightest helmet in the world by a mile. Every component has been redesigned for weight-saving from the main body to the buckle. £109.99 from Cycle Surgery (www.cyclesurgery.com)



FULL-FACE T.H.E. Empire: Aimed at the dedicated off-roader, this full-face helmet has a strikingly decorated outer design and lined inner for increased safety and comfort. £139 from Cycle Surgery (as before)



JASMINE GARDNER

HELMETS ON

ANDREW NEATHER says you'd be mad to leave the house without one

MR JUSTICE Griffith Williams is a fool to suggest that cyclists who don't wear helmets are partially liable if they get killed or injured by cars. Cyclists, bareheaded or otherwise, are not responsible for any of the dangerous or plain stupid driving I see every day. Nevertheless, I still think you've got to be mad to cycle without a helmet.

For me, buckling on my helmet is automatic — I can't imagine not doing so, even though I grew up cycling in the days before such accoutrements.

True, there is a fierce debate about just how much difference it makes: the internet is full of arguments back and forth over various health studies and accident statistics. One report last year even claimed that wearing a helmet made having an accident more likely: supposedly because drivers think you're harder-core and give you a narrower margin. In fact, it's hard to prove anything much from such figures, since there are so many variables: if you wear a helmet and don't get injured, it might just be because you're more careful.

But for me the calculation is simple: if you fall off a cycle, you have a high chance of hitting your head. And if you hit your head on the road or a kerb — never mind on the bonnet of a white van — you will do yourself damage.

Although I have reason to believe that my skull is reassuringly thick — I once survived being thrown 10 feet by a car in Covent Garden and landing in the road on my head — it's not a hunch I want to test again. Seventy per cent of all fatalities among cyclists are due to head injuries; helmets don't guarantee your safety but they greatly reduce your risk of a serious head injury. It's common sense.

I don't think I'm sacrificing much. To hear anti-helmet zealots rhapsodise about the pleasures of cycling with the wind in their hair, you'd think



'Helmets greatly reduce your risk of a serious head injury. It's common sense'

their morning commute was on a sunlit Pacific coastal byway not down, say, the concrete-and-metal corridor of Blackfriars Bridge. Sure, a sweaty scalp and nylon straps aren't great on a really hot day but there are few enough of those here for it to be a major irritant.

Still, I wouldn't deny helmet-haters the right to cycle as nature intended. It is suggested that in places where helmets have been made compulsory, such as Australia, it may have discouraged people from taking up cycling. And whether or not cyclists choose to protect themselves, we shouldn't lose sight of the fact that one group of road users is responsible for the vast majority of accidents: drivers.

Andrew Neather cycles 10 miles a day between Herne Hill and Kensington.

'MAKE THEM COMPULSORY'

THE EXPERTS SAY...

"Cycle helmets act as a buffer when one's skull is struck, thus reducing the impact to the brain. Cycle helmets should be compulsory for children — we have a duty to protect them." Colin Shieff, consultant neurosurgeon at the Royal Free Hospital

"We believe it should be compulsory, at least for children, to wear helmets. Mayor Boris Johnson should set a better example — parents with children disabled from not wearing helmets

would not support his viewpoint [that it's OK not to wear them]. The effects are physical, cognitive and behavioural." Peter McCabe, CEO of Headway, Brain Injury Association

"It saddens me to see so many children wearing their helmets incorrectly, often worn back to front. When my son learns to cycle I will make him wear a helmet and I will wear one myself to set an example." Paul Walker of Head Protection Evaluations helmet testing centre

SAFETY STATISTICS

Helmets can reduce head injury by 88 per cent, shows recent research in the New England Journal of Medicine.
According to the Bicycle Helmet Initiative Trust, approximately 90,000 of

under 16-year-olds need hospital treatment for head injuries caused by cycling.
45 per cent of child cyclists who attend A&E departments in hospitals have suffered severe head injuries.

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