

Study: Helmets make a difference on the slopes

By Gretchen Reynolds, New York Times

Recently, researchers from the department of sport science at the University of Innsbruck in Austria stood on the slopes at a local ski resort and trained a radar gun on a group of about 500 skiers and snowboarders, each of whom had completed a lengthy personality questionnaire about whether he or she tended to be cautious or a risk taker.

The researchers had asked their volunteers to wear their normal ski gear and schuss or ride down the slopes at their preferred speed. Although they hadn't informed the volunteers, their primary aim was to determine whether wearing a helmet increased people's willingness to take risks, in which case helmets could actually decrease safety on the slopes.

What they found was reassuring.

To many of us who hit the slopes with, in my case, literal regularity – I'm an ungainly novice snowboarder – the value of wearing a helmet can seem self-evident. It protects your head from severe injury. During the Big Air finals at the Winter X Games in Aspen, Colo., this past weekend, for instance, Halldor Helgason, a 23-year-old Icelandic snowboarder, over-rotated on a triple back flip, landed headfirst on the snow and was briefly knocked unconscious. But like the other competitors he was wearing a helmet, and didn't fracture his skull.

Indeed, studies have concluded that helmets reduce the risk of a serious head injury by as much as 60 percent. But a surprising number of safety experts and snowsport enthusiasts remain unconvinced that helmets reduce overall injury risk.

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