

CHOOSING A NEW HELMET

Making a Lifesaving Choice

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INTRODUCTION: Choosing a new helmet is one of the most important motorcycle-related decisions you will make. One of the things I have learned during my years of teaching “RiderCourses” is that some riders buy a new helmet **just before** they take a “RiderCourse.” Then they come to class and learn something that convinces them they made a mistake in their choice. This brief article is aimed at helping riders make informed decisions regarding choosing a new helmet. The information in this article is based on research fact and on my own experience. What you are getting is my best recommendation.

BUY THE BEST: Buy the most expensive helmet you can afford. Just like anything else, cost most often represents quality. Obviously, this is a general rule and there are exceptions; but when it comes to your head, cost should be no object. If you can afford a \$1,000 motorcycle, you can certainly afford a \$200 helmet. If you can afford a \$10,000 motorcycle, there is not a helmet made you cannot afford.

FULL COVERAGE: A full-coverage or full-face helmet covers more and protects better. No argument. Nothing else to say.

DOT and SNELL STANDARDS: The relationship between the Department of Transportation (DOT) and the Snell Memorial Foundation (Snell) standards takes study to understand. There are similarities and differences between the two standards. But what is certain is that these organizations set the standards or benchmarks that helmets must meet (DOT) and can meet (Snell). The research on the subject is incomplete, and informed individuals will express different opinions regarding which standard is “best.” All helmets must meet the DOT standard. Why not make it simple and buy a helmet that meets both the DOT and Snell standard? That’s my recommendation.

COLOR: When it comes to being on a motorcycle, one thing is certain: you are hard to *see*. Not being visible (conspicuous to others) is a primary cause of motorcycle crashes. When you are riding, your head is usually the highest point – put something on it that others can see! “Bright is Right” is a slogan worth taking to heart – or head. White, bright red, yellow, orange, or bright multicolored helmets are good choices. Black or any other dark color is a choice that could cause someone to later say, “Sorry, officer, I didn’t *see* the motorcyclist.”

FIT: The correct fit is a bit hard to describe. You want a helmet that feels “snug” all around your head: over your ears, on your forehead, and next to your cheeks. With the helmet on, try holding on to the helmet and moving your head side to side. The helmet is too big if you can turn your head inside the helmet; it should be snug enough to resist your attempt. Feel for pressure points, at which the helmet should again be snug, but not hurting. If you wear glasses, try them on. Check the fit with the helmet strap very loosely fastened. You should not have to depend on the strap to keep the helmet on. Tighten up the strap and try lifting the helmet off your head from the rear. If it feels like it wants to come off, the helmet is too large.

WHERE AND HOW TO BUY: Your local dealer is the place to start. The dealer should help you locate and purchase the best helmet for you. Remember, however, that dealers cannot stock every brand, size, and color. Some of the brands that competition riders choose—like Bell, Arai, and Shoei—are often not found at your local dealer. If you know the features you want, by using a sizing chart, your dealer should be able to guide you through one of his/her many catalogs to find a helmet that’s just right for you.

About the author: *Dr. Petterson has been instructing Motorcycle RiderCourses to residents in Michigan since 1985. He is a Chief Instructor with the Motorcycle Safety Foundation and is responsible, in part, for training RiderCourse instructors in all of Michigan. He has a lead role in helping to ensure that the instructors with Ferris State University operate at the highest professional standards. He holds a doctorate in education from Western Michigan University. Dan is an avid off-road rider who has a long list of motorcycling accomplishments, both off and on road. In recent years, he has successfully completed several “high-performance” riding courses, including the Penguin Advanced Road Racing School and Freddie Spencer’s High Performance Riding School.*