

Richardson death revives debate on ski helmets

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News that actress Natasha Richardson died of head injuries after falling on a ski slope has renewed debate over whether helmets should be mandatory for snowboarders and downhill skiers.

The 45-year-old actress was not wearing a helmet when she fell Monday at Mont Tremblant ski resort in Quebec. She died Wednesday in a New York hospital.

It's unclear whether a helmet could have saved Richardson. But research shows wearing a helmet decreases the likelihood of having a head injury by 40 to 60 percent, said Dr. Robert Williams, associate professor of anesthesia and pediatrics at Fletcher Allen Health Care in Burlington, Vt.

"There's no downside at all to wearing a helmet," he said.

The National Ski Areas Association is not aware of any states that mandate helmets, but the association and its member resorts promote their use, and a growing number of skiers and snowboarders choose to wear them.

According to the group, nearly half of U.S. skiers and snowboarders wore helmets in the past two years, up from about 25 percent five years earlier. Sales of helmets have grown at a rate of about 9 percent each year since 2005-2006, according to SnowSports Industries America.

Quebec officials said Thursday that they are considering making helmets mandatory on ski slopes following Richardson's accident. Emergency room doctors had been lobbying for the requirement, and Richardson's death added impetus to the plans, said Jean-Pascal Bernier, a spokesman for the sports minister.

"By no means will a helmet save you 100 percent but it's definitely a step in the right direction to try to prevent brain damage or something like that," said Valerie Powell of the Canada Safety Council.

But the National Ski Areas Association, based in Lakewood, Colo., stops short of calling for legislation.

The increase in helmet usage has not reduced the overall number of ski fatalities; more than half of the people involved in fatal accidents last season were wearing helmets at the time of the incident, according to information gathered by the group.

And ski and snowboarding-related deaths are relatively rare. During the 2004-2005 season, 45 fatalities occurred out of the 56.9 million skier/snowboarder days reported for the season, according to NSAA.

Ski operators are among the most vocal opponents to mandated helmet use.

Alexis Boyer of the Quebec Ski Areas Association said 90 percent of youngsters under 12 already use helmets, but making that law would put operators in the position of having to police their guests, many of whom come from outside the province and country and may not be aware of the requirements.

Still, people tend to change their behavior as a result of high-profile deaths.

Andrea Fereshteh, 29, a writer at Duke University, said she started wearing a helmet after the ski-related deaths of Sonny Bono and Michael Kennedy. Both crashed into trees.

"It just became much more publicized about the need for helmets," she said.

Richardson's death is likely to hit home for skiers because she was on a beginner slope when she fell. Resort officials say she seemed fine immediately afterward and even refused to see a doctor but that she began complaining of a headache about an hour later and was rushed to hospital.

Scott Kerschbaumer, a former ski instructor who has never worn a helmet, considered Bono's and Kennedy's skiing deaths to be the result of high-speed, somewhat reckless behavior.

Richardson shows "that the most serious of injuries and even death can result from the most innocuous of falls while skiing."

Kerschbaumer said he hadn't wanted to wear a helmet because of vanity and comfort, but will now purchase one for himself and his 6-year-old son.

As a beginner skier, Latoicha Phillips Givens, 35, an attorney in Atlanta, thought she was safe skiing without one. She said she certainly is going to wear one now.

But Bill Douglass, 37, a social media strategist in New York City, said he doesn't want to see people overreact.

"I think wearing a helmet when skiing is going too far," he said. "Better to encourage people to focus on smarter safety measures like taking classes, learning how to stop properly, that kind of thing."

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