



DATA

Relative risk in cycling

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The promotion of cycle helmets portrays cycling as an especially risky activity, but examination of comparative risk data reveals otherwise. It transpires that cycling is in fact one of the safest ways to spend one's time. As well as being safer than the obvious high-risk sports such as climbing, it is also much safer than more 'ordinary' sports such as football, swimming or fishing and, indeed, safer than general 'living' (the net outcome of all causes of death).

The data below compare cycling with other activities based on different indicators.

Risk relative to cycling based on fatality rates per participant (UK)

		<i>Relative risk per participant</i>
Less safe	Airsports	450
	Climbing	137
	Motor sports	81
	Fishing	41
	Horse riding	29
	Swimming	7.0
	Athletics	5.7
	Football	4.9
	Tennis	4.2
		Cycling
Safer	Golf	0.83
	Rambling	0.06

Figures relate to 1986 and are derived from OPAS Monitors from the Office of Population Censuses and Surveys, UK.

The number of fatalities are taken from Coroner's Court records and information on participation rates from the General Household Survey.

Risk by time (US)

		<i>Fatalities per million hours</i>
Less safe	Sky diving	128.71
	General aviation	15.58
	On-road motorcycling	8.80
	Scuba diving	1.98
	Living (all causes of death)	1.53
	Swimming	1.07
	Snowmobiling	0.88
	Passenger cars	0.47
	Water skiing	0.28
		Bicycling
Safer	Flying (scheduled domestic airlines)	0.15
	Hunting	0.08
	Cosmic radiation from transcontinental flights	0.035



Home living (active)	0.027
Traveling in a school bus	0.022
Passenger car post-collision fire	0.017
Home living (including sleeping)	0.014
Residential fire	0.003

Data from Failure Analysis Associates, Inc (now Exponent Inc), Design News, 10 April 1993.

Deaths per year (GB)

<i>Deaths per year</i>	
Cycling, road traffic accidents	138
Cycling, other	29
All transport	3,032
At home	3,974
Other accidents	5,026
Obesity (England only)	30,000
Heart disease due to inactivity	58,090
All heart disease	157,000

These figures take no account of population at risk, but if exposure is taken into account, the risk of being killed through cycling is very small compared with most of the other activities cited.

Risk per lifetime (US)

<i>Risk of death during lifetime</i>	
Heart disease	1 in 5
Motor vehicle accident	1 in 84
Pedestrian accident	1 in 626
Motorcycle accident	1 in 1,020
Bicycle accident	1 in 4,919

Source: National Geographic, August 2006. These statistics show the relative risk to society; no account is taken of exposure.

Risk by distance and age (NL)

<i>Age group</i>	<i>Risk of injury per million km</i>	
	<i>Motorists (driver)</i>	<i>Cyclists</i>
12 - 14		16.8
15 - 17		18.2
18 - 24	33.5	7.7
25 - 29	17.0	8.2
30 - 39	9.7	7.0
40 - 49	9.7	9.2
50 - 59	5.9	17.2
60 - 64	10.4	32.1
> 64	39.9	79.1
Total	20.8	21.0

The statistics for motorists exclude driving on motorways, where risk is very much less than on ordinary roads, for there is no comparable factor for cycling.

The average total risk is biased against cyclists because of the inclusion of two age groups (under 18 years) that do not exist in motorists; two groups, moreover, who have neither the caution nor experience of their elders.

Source: Dekoster & Schollaert, 1999



Risk in past 30 days

Researchers polled 5,238 subjects by telephone, simply asking if they'd done any of a predetermined set of activities in the past 30 days. Those who answered "yes" for a given activity were asked further questions about it, including whether they were injured "severely enough that you went for medical care or missed one-half day or more of work, housework, or school." Percentage injured results were: (Powell, 1998)

Aerobics	1.4%
Gardening	1.6%
Walking for exercise	1.4%
Weightlifting	2.4%
Cycling	0.9%

The relative risk between gardening and cycling has been examined in another study. 1,337 people were surveyed for a report on sport and recreation injuries. One in six respondents had required medical treatment in this period, with 5% of gardeners having suffered injury warranting attention compared with 3.9% of cyclists. (CenQueensUniv, 2003)

Other sources

- A review of 2,546 patients under age 19 seen by pediatric neurosurgeons at the Medical College of Georgia in Augusta between 1996 and 2002 revealed 64 sports-related injuries, 15 of which were golf-related and 17 of which were bicycle-related. (Rahimi et al, 2005)

References

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The Bicycle Helmet Research Foundation (BHRF), an incorporated body with an international membership, exists to undertake, encourage and spread the scientific study of the use of bicycle helmets. Also to consider the effect of the promotion and use of helmets on the perception of cycling in terms of risk and the achievement of wider public health and societal goals.

BHRF strives to provide a resource of best-available factual information to assist the understanding of a complex subject, and one where some of the reasoning may conflict with received opinion. In particular BHRF seeks to provide access to a wider range of information than is commonly made available by those that take a strong helmet promotion stance. It is hoped that this will assist informed judgements about the



pros and cons of cycle helmets.

For more information, please visit www.cyclehelmets.org.

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