

HAVE A SAFE TRIP

Bright colors and jazzy designs make today's protective and reflective gear fun to wear. Front row, from left: Sandband polo wraps from Libertyville Saddle Shop; Lexington Safety Products' Lid-locker helmet; Fabri-Tech's Night Lights orange-mesh safety vest; Bright Ideas' reflective helmet cover, courtesy of Libertyville Saddle Shop; Bright Lights reflective safety vest; International Riding Helmets' Air-



Lite; Fabri-Tech's Night Lights Day-Glo Yellow Leg Wraps; the STI Breakaway Stirrup Dangle attached; Fabri-Tech's Night Lights reflective tail wrap; Fabri-Tech's Night Lights Day-Glo Yellow Browband. Back row from left: INTEC's Flex Rider body protector; Troxel's Legacy helmet; Caldene Clothing Company Ltd.'s Oyster Z vest.

YOU EXPECT TO SEE A HELMET ON A JOCKEY OR A JUMPER RIDER OR a 3-day eventer. And perhaps you've even seen some of these daring folks sporting protective vests that make them look like something out of *NYPD Blue*. But you don't need that stuff. After all, you're not jumping or galloping flat-out, so your risk of injury is minimal, right?

Wrong. According to the American Medical Equestrian Association, riding accidents can happen when we least expect them. Almost as many riding-related injuries occur at home (35 percent) as in competition (38 percent). An additional 14 percent occur "in public," such as while on a trail ride at a state park.

And, according to a 1997 United States Pony Clubs study, just 50 percent of the injuries sustained while Pony Clubbers were riding occurred while jumping. That means fully half the mounted injuries occurred while riders were working "on the flat" or out for a trail ride, or even at a walk or a standstill.

"The great myth is that riding Western exempts you from injuries," says Dru Malavase, who chairs the Task Group on Equestrian Protective Headgear for the American Society for Testing and Materials. (See "What's the ASTM?" on page 76.) In her 3 years as head of the USPC's helmet-standards committee and her 20 years with ASTM, she's heard all the conventional wisdom, excuses, and rationales for not "strapping one on" before you climb into the saddle.

"I've heard the comment that riding Western is a much more 'stable' way to learn to ride—presumably because of the saddle horn," says Malavase. "But if your horse falls with you, a Western

saddle won't protect your head. Plus, there's a distinct possibility of bodily injury because of that horn."

And, of course, today's safety gear goes way beyond helmets. To help you decide which safety gear is right for you and your loved ones, we collected samples of several types of safety products. We'll tell you about each of them, explain what each one can—and can't—protect you against, and give you a cost range. Finally, we'll give you resources to get you started on your safety-gear shopping. (See "Your Guide to Safety Gear," on page 78.)

PRODUCT: HELMET

An inside look: The secret to today's approved protective helmets is the ultra-lightweight liner, which compresses on impact to absorb shock, allowing your brain to come to a halt gradually instead of slamming against the inside of your skull. Most helmet liners are covered with a thin outershell. Some helmets have a black-velvet exterior for that traditional hunt-cap look, while others resemble Western hats. Many have vents to allow for maximum airflow and cooling, and most have a visor to help shield your eyes from glare. (Some models' visors are detachable for convenience and so they'll break away on impact.) All have comfortable harnesses and chinstraps, which fasten with easy-locking closures.

Helmets of old were heavy, cumbersome, and hot—not to mention insufficiently protective. The first entrants labeled ASTM/SEI- (Safety Equipment Institute) certified produced an unflattering "bowl head"

Here's how to find the right protective and reflective gear to help you make each ride safe.



look. Today's helmets, though, are sleek, lightweight, comfortable, and cool—they actually lower your head's external temperature by a degree or 2 on hot days,

making them literally better than nothing. Moreover, they're available in a wide variety of colors and sizes to suit every wearer.

You need one if: You ride horses, or even just work around them. You buckle up every time you get in the car, right? For optimal protection, treat helmet use the same way. Although accidents do happen during competition, many occur while at home and in ultra-relaxed situations, where lack of attention or carelessness may play a part, according to Malavase.

Here's a real-life example of how helmets can protect you: "I was riding my Anglo-Arab mare one frosty day in our dirt-and-grass turnout area," says Meg Alfoni of Ipswich, Massachusetts. "We were traveling along the edge of a slight hill when she lost her footing and fell sideways on me. I'm convinced that, without a helmet, I'd have had a severe concussion. It hurt to laugh or cough for a few weeks, but my head was fine."

Cost: You can find ASTM/SEI-approved helmets for as little as \$35. Practically every tack shop and equestrian catalog carries them, so it's easy to compare styles, sizes, and prices. If you haven't worn a helmet before, go to a tack shop that carries a large selection. Try on lots of them until you find one that fits well and comfortably.

Additional tips: Don't wear your bicycle helmet riding, says Malavase. Bike helmets aren't designed to protect against falls from the height of a mounted rider, and they offer less protection to the back and

Above: Today's riding helmets are lightweight and cool. The Lidlocker in two designs by Lexington Safety Products. Inset: Three choices from International Riding Helmets. From left: the Schooling Helmet; the Air-Lite; and the Pro-Lite. Right: For enhanced safety, pair your helmet with Caldene Clothing Company Ltd.'s Oyster Z body protector or pair INTEC's Flex Rider body protector with International Riding Helmets' Schooling Helmet (inset).

BY JENNIFER O. BRYANT
PHOTOGRAPHED BY DAVID CAMPLI

USE YOUR HEAD

For an in-depth look at what riding-related injuries can do to your mental capacities, check out the 22-minute video *Every Time... Every Ride*. It makes a compelling case for donning a properly fitted American Society for Testing and Materials/Safety Equipment Institute-approved riding helmet before mounting up. Medical experts point out exactly what happens to your brain when it becomes injured in a fall. Riders who suffered head injuries while riding bareheaded talk about the challenges they've faced in reconstructing their lives. Especially gripping are stories from riders who've suffered permanent brain damage.

The video costs \$15, including s/h (\$11 each for orders of five or more). To order, contact: Washington State 4-H Foundation, 7612 Pioneer Way, Dept. HR, Puyallup, WA 98371; (253) 445-4570.

sides of the head. And don't expect your riding helmet to last forever, she notes. First rule of thumb: If your helmet sustains a blow of any kind (on or off your head), ship it back to the manufacturer. If it's been damaged, most manufacturers will send you a replacement for a modest fee. Other signs that your helmet needs replacing: a harness that's pulled loose; a broken harness-fastener; yellowing of a white helmet; fading of a black-velvet-covered helmet; surface cracks, holes, or dents; a liner with chunks missing or that's become compressed in places; cracks through the shell or the liner.

PRODUCT: PROTECTIVE VEST

An inside look: These form-fitting, protective-foam-filled garments are cut to allow freedom of movement in the saddle. They help protect your vulnerable "trunk" area, including the tailbone, in the event of a blow to the torso, such as from a fall or a kick. (Fully one-third of the riding injuries reported by the AMEA were to the

