

How to Fit a Bicycle Helmet

Your objective: Snug, Level, Stable

You can't get the most protection from your helmet unless it fits well. You would be surprised how many riders have never fitted their helmets, and suffer from discomfort ride after ride, while the helmet may not really help when they crash. In particular, many do not adjust the straps correctly. In normal riding the fitting pads keep your helmet sitting in place, but the straps are critical when you crash and your head is suddenly jerking violently about. The helmet could come off and leave your head unprotected for the crunch.

You want the helmet to be comfortably touching the head all the way around, level on the head and stable enough to resist even violent shakes or hard blows and stay in place. You need that to be sure it will be in place and protecting your head when it hits pavement in a crash! You want the helmet as low on the head as possible to maximize side coverage, fitting uniformly all the way around, with the strap comfortably snug so that you can still open your mouth but the strap does not pinch, bind or cut into your chin, and the helmet cannot be made to rock back and forth more than an inch or so.

1. For starters: make sure you have the right size helmet

Helmets come in many sizes and shapes: egg-shaped, pointy, elongated, narrow, or wide. Helmet manufacturers have different adaptations to producing a helmet that fits as many heads as possible. You should be prepared for the eventuality that the helmet you are trying to fit might not be compatible with your particular head.

2. Use the fit pads

Helmets always have at least one set of fitting foam pads for the inside. Many come with more than one set, and the second or even third set of thicker pads can be used to customize the shape. With the light helmets we use now, you can often remove the top pad entirely before you start. This lowers the helmet on the head, bringing its protection down further on the sides where it is needed. On the other hand, it also cuts down somewhat on the flow of cooling air by placing the rider's head flush against the inside of the helmet. So it may not be for everyone, but we find that it works with most helmets for us, even in summer, and it can buy you a lot of extra side protection.

Adjust the side fit pads by using thinner or thicker pads where there is a space, adding thicker pads on the sides for narrow heads, or thicker pads in the back for shorter heads. You may also move pads, particularly on the "corners" in the front and rear. The objective is to make the helmet fit with pads touching all the way around, without making it so tight that it will be a constant nuisance. The pads may compress slightly in use, but better ones will not compress much, so do not count on that to loosen the fit. The helmet should sit level on the head, with the front just above the eyebrows, or if the rider uses glasses, just above the frame of the glasses so it does not bump on them.

A note on air channels: for maximum coolness you may want to leave gaps in the fitting pads around the head to let air flow in.

3. Adjust the straps

Now put the helmet on and fasten the buckle. Be patient here because this could take as long as 15 minutes to get it right. But the time you spend here will be returned many times over as you ride with a comfortable helmet and get all the protection you paid for.

You want the chinstrap snug against your chin, with the V of the side straps meeting just below your ear with no slack to let the helmet rock back and forth. First, adjust the length of the rear (nape) straps, the length of the front straps, and the location of the V fitting where the straps come together. That may involve sliding the straps through the top of the helmet to get the length even on both sides. Take a few minutes to figure out the strap configuration and keep fiddling until you get it right. Then adjust the length of the chinstrap so it is comfortably snug. If it hangs down visibly or you can slide two fingers under it, it is too loose. If it cuts into your chin and is not comfortable, it is too tight. Now pay some attention to the rear stabilizer if your helmet has one. Many of them have some type of adjustment, and some even let you adjust while the helmet is on your head. The stabilizer can help a lot to keep the helmet from jiggling around in normal use, but it does not by itself keep the helmet on your head in a crash, and is still essential to follow the first steps for basic strap adjustment in this paragraph.

When you think the straps are about right, shake your head around. Then put your palm under the front edge and push up and back. Can you move the helmet more than an inch or so from level, exposing your bare forehead? Then you need to tighten the strap beside and in front of your ear, and perhaps loosen the rear nape strap behind your ear. Again, the two straps should meet just below your ear. Now reach back and grab the back edge. Pull up. Can you move the helmet more than an inch? If so, tighten the nape strap. When you are done, your helmet should feel solid on your head and comfortable. It should not bump on your glasses when you ride (if it does, tighten the nape strap). If you walk into a wall, the helmet should hit before your nose does.

A well-fitted helmet is comfortable. You should forget you are wearing it most of the time, just like a seat belt or a pair of shoes. If it impinges on your riding enjoyment, something is wrong. If it still does not fit, keep working with the straps and pads, or try another helmet.

