Horseback riding accidents can cause head injuries resulting in death or permanent residual defects. These riding injuries occur most frequently in riders younger than 21 years of age. Approximately 20% of injuries in young riders are to the central nervous system. The majority of these injuries are cerebral contusions, concussions, or skull fractures. Use of approved helmets has been associated with a decline in the occurrence of severe head injuries.

In the early 1980s, numerous organizations (American Horse Shows Association, United States Pony Club, United States Combined Training Association, and the United States Equestrian team) began requiring all competitors to use helmets meeting the United States Pony Club Standard. This standard was developed by the National Operating Committee on Standards for Athletic Equipment. In 1988, the American Society for Testing and Materials (ASTM) passed new standards (ASTM F-1163) for equestrian helmets that required helmets to provide a higher level of protection than previous models. This is an industry-wide standard that replaces previous standards. As of March 1990, the United States Pony Club required use of these new helmets for all activities. New helmets that meet the ASTM standard will be certified by the Safety Equipment Institute (SEI), a compliance organization responsible for certifying industrial products. The SEI seal, containing the date and manufacturer's lot number, must be permanently applied to the inside of the helmet so the buyer will know it is an approved equestrian helmet.

The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) recommends the following steps for preventing and/or lessening the severity of horseback riding-related injuries:

1. Education programs, such as those offered by the United States Pony Club, should be presented to parents, riding instructors, horse show organizers, and managers. The programs should emphasize the risks involved in horseback riding and should present methods to minimize them.

2. Parents should be urged to verify that the horses their children ride are matched with their riding capabilities.

3. Riding activities should be supervised commensurate with the skill level of the rider.

4. Young riders, when mounted, should wear helmets that meet 1988 ASTM standards and are certified by the SEI. The helmets should be secured by appropriate chin straps. All organizations and activities (riding schools, horse shows, rodeos, etc) that promote or sanction horseback riding events should require entrants to use SEI-certified helmets.

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Horseback Riding and Head Injuries

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