

Health Tips

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Dr. D


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Health Tip: What Happened to Natasha Richardson?

Like the deaths of Sonny Bono and Michael Kennedy before her, the recent head-injury related death of Natasha Richardson has reignited the debate regarding the use of helmets on the ski slopes. What exactly happened to Ms. Richardson, and would wearing a helmet have prevented this tragedy?



The New York City medical examiner's office announced that the cause of Ms. Richardson's death was an epidural hematoma. An epidural hematoma is a serious closed-head injury in which bleeding occurs between the inside of the skull and the outer covering of the brain known as the "dura". Within the dura are many blood vessels that normally nourish the brain. With a severe blow to the head, the brain "bounces" inside the rigid skull and in the process, some of these blood vessels can tear and bleed. In the case of the epidural hematoma, the bleeding, which comes from an artery, can be rapid and severe. As the hematoma (blood clot) forms, a marked increase in pressure inside the skull occurs, producing additional brain injury. A classic feature of epidural hematoma, which was apparently seen in Ms. Richardson, is known as the "lucid interval". Following the initial injury, usually accompanied by brief loss of consciousness, the victim appears normal. This normal period of mental functioning or "lucid interval" may last several hours before brain function deteriorates, sometimes leaving the victim in a coma. Without prompt medical intervention, which could include surgery, to evacuate the clot and relieve the pressure on the brain, death occurs.



Investigations of the Bono and Kennedy deaths determined that both hit trees at high speeds, impacts that could have been lessened by a helmet, but may not have changed the outcome. In fact, the limited scientific information available indicates that while helmets appear to be effective at preventing minor injuries, they have not been proven to decrease skiing-related deaths. In most instances, it appears that people's behavior on the slopes is the most important issue in avoiding injuries. This is echoed by the National Ski Areas Association position that urges "skiers and riders to wear a helmet - but to ski or ride as if they are not wearing a helmet". In Ms. Richardson's case, however, a helmet may have

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made the difference between life and death. The injury did not involve a tree, but occurred on a beginner slope at relatively slow velocity. Modern ski helmets are designed to absorb the type of impact that she most likely received as well as protecting the critical temple region of the skull. There may be as yet undisclosed information related to the case that could have played a role in Ms. Richardson's death, such as the use of blood-thinning medications or an underlying clotting disorder that could have exaggerated the effects of the blow to the head. Most of the evidence, however, points to an epidural hematoma from a blow to the head, an injury that was potentially preventable with the use of a ski helmet.

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