

Don't Even Go There: Sizing Up the Risk of the Ride

By *Good Housekeeping*

Should you queue up for that 200-foot free-fall ride or a 100-mile-per-hour megacoaster? Here, from ride safety inspectors, is a quick list of the thrills to avoid:

- Being first in line - Safety engineers constantly modify rides for the first year or two after they open. Don't be a guinea pig by boarding a brand-new extreme ride.
- Fast rides whose back support only hits the middle of your torso - If your back is not supported during a ride that makes sudden movements, you're risking injury.
- Repeated runs - Your body needs a chance to recover, says Virginia amusement park consultant Ken Martin.
- Rides that abruptly switch directions at high speeds - "You can withstand a lot of force if you are just going straight," says safety consultant William Avery. "When you start jerking around, you've got problems."
- Playing fast and loose with restraints - There have been several cases of small children falling or jumping off rides. If there's any doubt about whether your child fits in the seat, get her out. The operator should check every lap bar or restraint before the car leaves the station.
- Disobeying any park warnings - Follow all weight, height, and age restrictions to the letter. And try to leave personal belongings, such as cameras or purses, at home; they can become dangerous projectiles. Once on board, keep your hands and arms in the car, holding on to the safety bar. Finally, experts note that older folks, overweight people, and women with brittle bones might want to avoid extreme thrill rides altogether.

Staying Safe at the Amusement Park

By *Good Housekeeping*

Tragic deaths at amusement parks made headlines last summer, but the real news is the rise of injuries. Sure, these parks are great fun, but the 9,200 people who went to hospital emergency rooms with ride-related injuries in 1998 probably don't think so.

To keep your family safe during your next visit to an amusement park, we asked ride safety inspectors and safety advocates for their recommendations. Still, the best way to keep your kids from harm's way is by talking to them before they get on that roller coaster.

Basic Safety Guidelines:

Kids 1-6

Even otherwise safe "kiddie" rides can be dangerous if you and your child don't exercise caution, so keep these suggestions in mind:

- Use your best judgment before letting your child get on a ride solo. Just because an amusement park says it's OK for your toddler to ride alone on the kiddie train, that doesn't mean he won't fall off and hurt himself.
- If a lap bar doesn't fit closely, take your child off the ride. Otherwise, your child may slip from under the bar when the ride is moving.
- Read the warning signals to your child before he gets on the ride. Also, tell him that he shouldn't get off the ride unless he's instructed to do so from the ride operator.
- Tell your child to hold on to the safety bar tightly, with both hands.
- Don't put extra responsibility on your older child by making him supervise your younger child. He might not be up to the task.

Kids 7 and older

When children get a little older, they're more independent and riding alone more often, usually on bigger, faster rides. That's why it's key to reiterate the importance of responsible behavior. Here are some pointers:

- Prepare your child for peer pressure. If your child is going off with a group of children, talk about issues that might come up, including the dangers of horseplay.
- Point out riders who are following the rules and those who aren't. Then ask your child what she thinks the consequences of a particular behavior, say, taking the seat belt off on a moving roller coaster, would be.
- Let them know that others can get hurt. Explain that fooling around on rides could result in injuries not only to themselves, but to innocent riders, too.

For more information about staying safe at amusement parks, please visit www.saferparks.org.

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Dorney Park's advertisement for the "longest, tallest, and fastest roller coaster in the Northeast" worked. When the Steel Force opened at the amusement park in Allentown, Penn., in May 1997, Judy Conway's three children were keen to ride the "megacoaster." That's how Conway, wanting to give her kids a treat, found herself boarding the giant ride two weeks after it opened, racing 75 miles per hour through the coaster's drops,

camelbacks, tunnels, twists, and turns — and covering more than a mile of track in about three minutes.

The headache started two days later, on a Saturday. By Sunday the pain was so intense that Conway made an appointment with her physician, who gave her a prescription to treat what he thought was a sinus infection. When that didn't work, she went to Thomas Jefferson University Hospital in Philadelphia. There, David Brock, M.D., director of neurologic critical care, discovered a spinal-fluid leak that a tear in the lining of Conway's brain had caused. "There is reasonable medical certainty," Dr. Brock says, "that the roller coaster was the likely cause of Judy's spinal-fluid leak."

"I lost six months of my life," says Conway, whose severe pain, a result of the gradual drain of cerebral spinal fluid, kept her bedridden for three months, then incapacitated for several more. "My children thought I was going to die." Conway filed suit against the park for \$100,000. Dorney Park officials denied that the roller coaster could have caused Conway's injury. But Dr. Brock notes that studies show Conway's condition is not an isolated case: "There is more and more literature suggesting that these high g-forces are injurious to the brain." In January, the American Academy of Neurology published a study linking roller coasters with brain injury. "We suspect many cases have been overlooked," says the study's chief author, Toshio Fukutake, M.D., of the department of neurology at Chiba University School of Medicine in Japan, who studied several patients who had developed blood clots on their brain following rides.

Brain injury, though perhaps the most dramatic, is just one of the serious conditions recently linked to roller coasters. In fact, while the public and the media have focused their attention on deaths — four people were killed on rides in a single week last August — injuries are a far greater threat. In 1998, 9,200 people went to hospital emergency rooms with ride-related injuries — a 24 percent jump from 1994. And they were reporting much more serious problems in addition to the usual bumps, bruises, and sprains: fractures, pinched nerves, herniated disks, broken vertebrae, and bruised spinal cords.

The surge in injuries accompanies the trend toward ever more extreme rides, the big-ticket attractions parks use to lure crowds in a competitive \$8.7 billion business. The amusement-park industry, however, insists that all rides are safer than ever. Given that more than 300 million people visited amusement parks last year, industry representatives note that your risk of being hurt on rides remains low. As for the bigger-than-ever, thrill-packed coasters? Park owners claim they are among the safest on the market. "Computer technology," says John Graff, president of the International Association of Amusement Parks and Attractions (IAAPA), "enables us to not only improve the design but improve the safety of those rides." When accidents do happen, Graff says that "80 percent of the time it's a result of rider error."

A growing number of safety advocates and government leaders disagree. "The industry says human behavior [is the cause]," says Ann Brown, chairman of the Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC), which collects statistics on the parks. "But all we

know is that there has been a dramatic rise in injuries, and we don't know why [without] investigating." Brown and others say that research is needed to determine the amount of force different people can tolerate when they're twisting and turning at speeds of up to 100 miles per hour.

The industry itself seems to be recognizing that extreme rides put some customers at risk, and it is taking measures to discourage some passengers from boarding the wildest ones. Taking its cue from ski resorts, the IAAPA has proposed uniform "black diamond" signs for high-intensity attractions. The warning currently under review: "High-thrill attraction. High speeds with extremely unusual and stressful physical forces. This ride contains startling and unexpected thrills appropriate for only the most healthy and physically able riders."

In the meantime, who will decide what's safe and what isn't — for both the "most healthy" riders and everyone else? Not the federal government: Congress stripped the CPSC of its authority over fixed-site theme parks in 1981, leaving it with control of only carnival rides, which the CPSC says have not contributed to the recent spike in injuries.

Some members of Congress are now pushing for the return of federal oversight of amusement parks. For now, local regulation remains scattershot. Eight states exempt parks from having to conduct inspections or report injuries. Florida excludes the largest parks from any kind of control. And it appears that some states with legislation in place may not enforce it.

In Texas, where injury reporting is mandated, the San Antonio Express-News found that Fiesta Texas (now under new owners) vastly underreported the number of people hurt during its first two seasons of operation. Fiesta Texas claimed that 13 people sustained back and neck injuries on the Rattler, the park's flagship coaster. But the newspaper's review of ambulance logs showed that more than 80 customers suffered this type of injury after riding the coaster. One of those not listed in the park's tally was Christina Bauer, now 19, who was unable to stand when her ride on the Rattler came to an end. She underwent two surgeries and years of rehabilitation to repair a bruised spinal cord.

In California, the state with historically the highest number of fatalities, Kathy Fackler of La Jolla learned how difficult it can be to obtain information in the absence of legislation. After her then five-year-old son's foot was torn in half on Disneyland's Big Thunder Mountain Railroad in March 1998, Fackler says Disney refused to share any information about safety improvements, making her understandably frustrated: "You can't possibly say safety is your number one priority if you won't tell riders what is going on out there." (Disneyland spokesperson Ray Gomez declined to respond, but noted that the park made some modifications to the ride following the incident.)

In 1999, Fackler joined the effort of state legislator Tom Torlakson, who proposed a bill to regulate California's parks. The initiative came before the state assembly just days after a 12-year-old boy died on a ride in Santa Clara. In October, the governor signed a law requiring injury reporting and inspections. While federal and state legislators debate new

laws, state inspectors, on a case-by-case basis, grapple with the introduction of ever more extreme rides. One ride that was proposed to New Jersey inspectors shot passengers out of a starting gate at a force approaching that experienced by a fighter pilot in battle. "I told them to come back to me with proof it was safe," says William Connolly, director of the New Jersey Division of Codes and Standards, which oversees ride safety in New Jersey. "They never did." Did some other state approve that manufacturer's ride? Connolly doesn't know.

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