

ATVs Not Safe for Children: MDs

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The scene of a fatal ATV crash is seen in Shubenacadie in 2005. There has been a significant increase in intensive care admissions at the IWK Health Centre for ATV-related injuries. SALTWIRE / FILE

JOHN MCPHEE
THE CHRONICLE HERALD

There are few, if any, good outcomes when a child is seriously injured in an ATV accident.

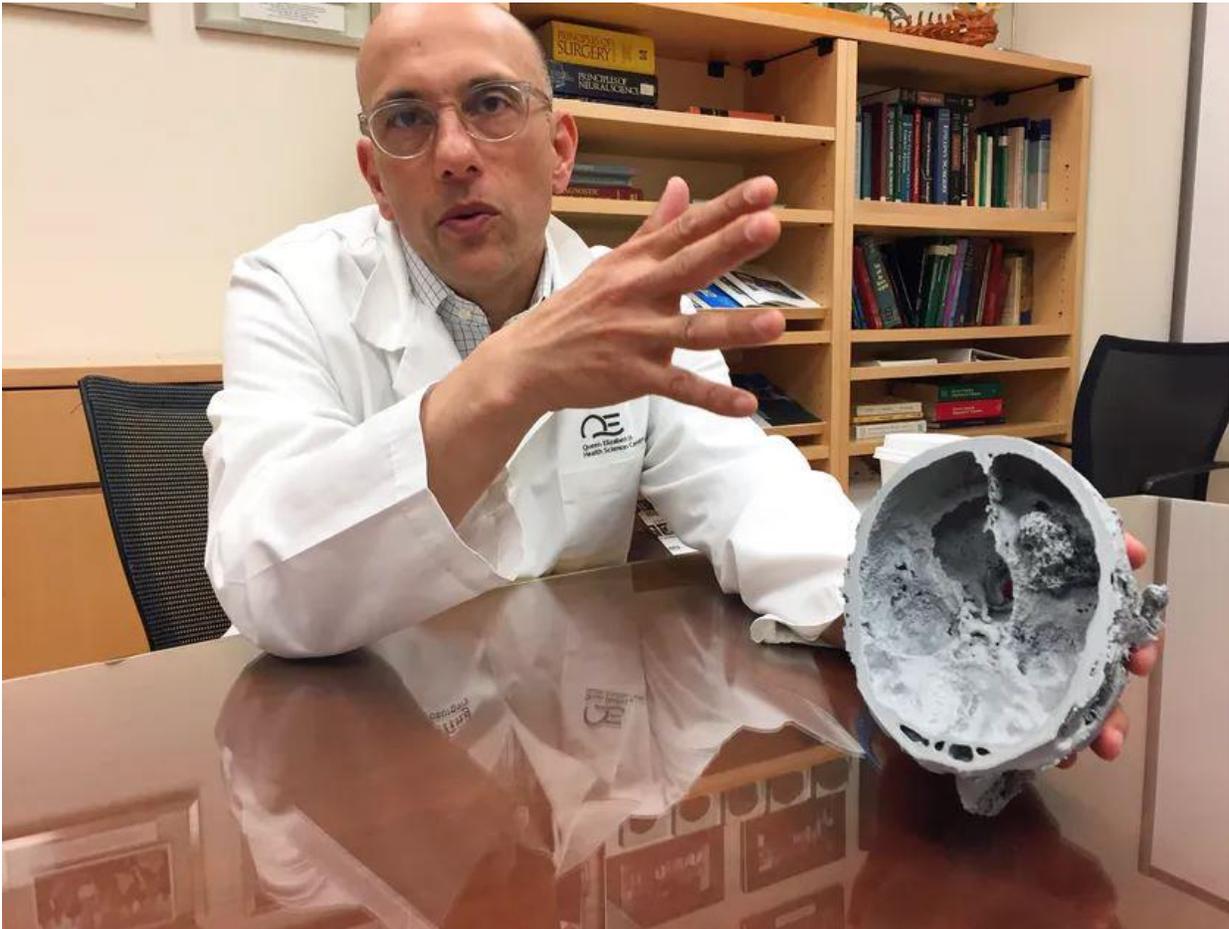
That's particularly the case when the injuries involve the brain and spinal cord, said Dr. Simon Walling, a pediatric neurosurgeon at the IWK Health Centre in Halifax.

"If somebody breaks their neck and damages their spinal cord, and if they break the bones and the ligaments and the spinal cord is injured, even with today's technology the likelihood of that person being able to walk independently, control their bowel and bladder function independently, would be a miracle, it would be like winning the lottery prize," Walling said in an interview Tuesday.

The same applies to brain injuries.

“The brain sits in a closed box, the skull,” said Walling, who has been a surgeon for over 25 years and teaches at Dalhousie University medical school.

“If there’s bleeding in there and it’s unchecked and if it’s not dealt with, pressure and swelling is going to lead to death. We are usually able to decompress this and stop the swelling but we cannot repair the damaged brain.”



Neurosurgeon Dr. Simon Walling holds a 3D printout of a patient's brain in 2018. Walling said brain damage related to trauma such as ATV crashes can be life-altering. - John McPhee / File

'LIFE-ALTERING EVENT'

Brain damage can significantly affect the child’s neurological abilities and mobility, Walling said.

“Traumatic brain injury is potentially a completely life-altering event. ... The absolute best prevention is not for the event to happen. That is the only way to change the outcome.”

The event in this conversation is an ATV accident. These crashes have sent about seven young people to the IWK’s pediatric intensive care unit since 2020.

That's a big increase compared to previous years, said Dr. Kristina Krmpotic, who specializes in critical injuries in young people at the IWK.

Krmpotic and Walling were among 15 pediatric specialists from Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island and New Brunswick who recently signed an open letter calling for action on ATV safety for young people.

"We're very very concerned about a significant increase in the number of ATV-related injuries that have been arriving in the Maritimes over the past probably 18 months, since the fall of 2020," Krmpotic said in an interview Tuesday.

"It's been a significant increase in the number of admissions to the pediatric intensive care unit at the IWK in children with incredibly severe injury, injuries they will either not recover from or injuries that they die from."

Over the past 10 years, the PICU would see an average of one ATV accident victim annually. But there have been seven PICU admissions since the fall of 2020 including five in 2021. (No stats were available for 2022).

The ages of PICU patients have ranged from toddlers who were ATV passengers to youths in their mid-teens.

About half of those admissions have resulted in deaths, Krmpotic said.

ATVs can be very top-heavy, especially four-wheelers, it's easy to roll them over especially if you're off-roading in rough terrain.

- RCMP Const. Guillaume Tremblay

ALCOHOL, SPEED FACTORS

In an interview Tuesday, RCMP Const. Guillaume Tremblay said that most ATV crashes have contributing factors such as speed, impaired driving or the lack of safety equipment such as helmets, "which are so vital to save your life in the event of a crash."

There were 29 collisions in 2021 reported to Nova Scotia RCMP involving off-highway vehicles that resulted in serious injuries or deaths. Information wasn't immediately available for the previous year or for 2022.

Last May CBC data journalists reported that at least 42 Atlantic Canadians died in 2020 in ATV and snowmobile crashes, the most since 2012.

In a tweet Tuesday, Nova Scotia RCMP urged riders to make safety a priority after two weekend crashes in HRM that resulted in serious injuries.

"Always ride sober, always wear your safety equipment, that's a good jacket, gloves, helmet especially," Tremblay said. "Have a plan in place. Carry a first-aid kit with you, maybe an overnight bag, always tell someone where you're going. It's vital. Even if you just break down, and you have to spend the night

out there in the woods, it does get cold at night in Nova Scotia and you don't want to end up with hypothermia.”

And slow down, he said. “ATVs can be very top-heavy, especially four-wheelers, it's easy to roll them over especially if you're off-roading in rough terrain.”

Trembly didn't have statistics on hand on whether more young people have been involved in recent crashes but “anytime there's a collision it does have lasting effects on families and first-responders and communities that go to these collisions and crashes.”



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SAFETY TRAINING AVAILABLE

Barry Barnet, executive director of the All-Terrain Vehicle Association of Nova Scotia, said his group also urges riders to make safety a priority.

“We promote safe, responsible use of ATVs and you know we continue to push that message to all our members and to others,” he said in a recent interview. “We provide safety training programs that members can take advantage of, and others, and some do. We've invested our members' money in a fleet of youth ATVs to help with the problem.”

Barnet said the pediatricians' letter caught him by surprise because he wasn't aware there was an increase in serious injuries, particularly involving youth. He said it's difficult to get official information from government and he's heard nothing anecdotally or through the media to indicate a spike in children's injuries.

But he said any rise in crashes could be related to a significant increase in off-roading and other outdoor activities during the pandemic.

“We’ve seen a tremendous increase in ATV sales at dealerships, in fact to the point where people are on wait lists to buy these things,” he said, adding that ATVANS membership has grown from 2,200 to 6,300 over the past decade.

'STRONG ATV CULTURE'

A joint statement in response to the pediatricians’ concerns from the Department of Natural Resources and the Public Works Department said there is a strong ATV culture in Nova Scotia. “We want all Nova Scotians - young and old - who choose to ride ATVs to be safe and responsible,” said the statement, which added training is required for riders aged 15 and under with limits on where and when they can ride.

A person as young as six can operate an ATV as long as the engine is not more than 70 CCs and they’re supervised by an adult. Riders between 12 and 16 can ride a machine as large as 90 CCs.

“Training young people on how to safely operate an OHV (off-highway vehicle) is a priority,” the government statement said.

This ensures that young people will be trained by a certified professional, on a closed course, on the appropriately sized machine.

“Government departments that are involved in the regulation of ATVs will certainly take a look at the information to determine whether anything further needs to be addressed to enhance safety.”

'NOT SAFE' FOR CHILDREN

Pediatricians have said for years only adults should be allowed to ride ATVs. Krmptic said even smaller ATVs are “very heavy.”

In their letter, the pediatricians acknowledged many Maritime families enjoy ATVs and that children want to participate.

“We also know that children cannot adequately control motorized vehicles, and that they are vulnerable as passengers. ATV use by children and teens is not safe.

“We want parents to know that ATV injuries and deaths are preventable. We ask that parents be aware of their children’s off-highway vehicles access and be aware of the risks associated with these machines.”