

Alberta's 4-H Council has approved a mandatory helmet policy for young people who sign up for its horse-riding programs. Starting Oct. 1, all beginner riders and anyone born in 2000 or later and enrolled in 4-H equine clubs must wear a protective helmet if they want to mount up.

Stacy Price, president of Alberta 4-H, says the rule is about keeping young people safe, especially from dangerous head injuries such as concussions.

"Safety is our first concern at 4-H. We are trying to improve our safety. We are trying to be proactive here," Price said Wednesday. "We see it as a growing trend and we don't want to be the ones that are lagging behind."

She said the policy, which was first suggested by Alberta Agriculture last summer, will also keep insurance costs down for the organization, which is geared to young people in rural areas.

The British Columbia 4-H Council has had an equestrian helmet policy since 2007. It is not clear how many other 4-H groups across Canada have such rules. The Alberta Centre for Injury Control and Research praised 4-H Alberta's decision.

Associate director Kathy Belton said the latest research shows that concussions and even bumps to the head can affect a person's sensitivity to light and noise and can lead to difficulties in concentration and memory later in life.

"I think it is a fantastic idea and long overdue. I say good on 4-H. We have been remiss in this province for not insisting on helmet use," Belton said. "We need to protect those young brains as they grow and mature."