

Safety Advice for Novice Motorcycle Riders

How to safely get past being a beginning motorcyclist: 11 ways to leave your learner. Expanded from the "Street Survival" column in the October 2004 issue of Motorcycle Cruiser magazine. By Art Friedman.



Illustration by John Breakey

Expanded from the Original Column. Much has been said and written about the recent and continuing growth of motorcycling. Lots of new and returning riders are hitting the streets (hopefully not literally), and we hear from quite a few of them. The typical query pertains to a choice of bike or gear, but with increasing frequency, new and born-again riders ask what they can take to stay safe on their new or future motorcycles.

Most of these riders have heard and applied the usual advice about taking a new rider course from the Motorcycle Safety Foundation or a state agency. They have gotten licensed (a step that makes riders

significantly less likely to turn up in accident statistics. However, these readers recognize that a beginner's course is just the tip of the iceberg, and that learning how to control a motorcycle is much different from learning how to operate it safely.

The question is quite valid. New motorcyclists crash more than those who have been riding for some time, and the first six month appears to be especially dangerous. So what actions can a new rider (or for that matter, an experienced one) take to make life on two wheels safer?

1. Be Conspicuous

Many motorcyclists will be surprised to find this at the top of my list of things to do to stay safe, but the most key issue in surviving among those much larger vehicles out there is to be seen by their drivers. My bright orange helmet does more to keep me out of harm's way than any three other traffic strategies. It is also the easiest measure to exercise, since it is completely passive once it's on.

Bright colors may not be stylish, but they are good for your health (if only by keeping your blood pressure down). When other drivers see you, you spend a lot less time demonstrating your swerving, braking, and swearing skills.

Black, by far the most popular color for motorcyclists, isn't the worst possible color for a motorcyclist, but it's way down there. Olive drab, gray, camouflage patterns, and other dull colors are worse, but black doesn't jump out at all, and at night it is the worst choice. The best choices are those eye-catching colors in the red-to-yellow range, and they should be bright; a dull yellow is not as effective as a bright yellow. Fluorescent colors are best. I have even seen eye-catching fluorescent blue and green helmets. Finally, you want a big, uninterrupted section of that color. A complicated scheme of several bright colors is less effective than a continuous patch of a single bright color.

Where should that bright color be? Since most collisions occur with vehicle that started out in front of you, it should be on the front of the vehicle or rider. A yellow touring fairing (such as that on the Gold Wing 1800) is hard to overlook, but a small patch of yellow in the same area isn't as effective. More likely, you will wear your conspicuity. The Hurt

Report found that riders wearing bright jackets crashed less frequently. Recently, a New Zealand study found that rider who wore white helmets instead of black helmets got punted off the road less often. It noted that bright colors seemed to be even more accident-preventative. From my experience, a really bright helmet is the best approach. Wearing an equally bright jacket seemed to have less effect in traffic than the bright helmet, even though the eye-catching area of the jacket was larger. My presumption is that the height of a helmet has some effect, since people can see it over cars around you. Reflective panels on a helmet or jacket are eye-catching at night.

Use your headlight too. Running the high beam during the day makes you stand out, and you can further employ your headlight's eye-grabbing tendency by using a headlight modulator, which flashes the high beam.

2. Wear a Helmet

No matter how careful you are, things beyond your control can conspire to pitch you down the road. When that happens, the only thing that will make a major difference in your future is whether you chose to wear a good helmet. The choice between no helmet (or a novelty beanie helmet, which is almost the same thing) and a basic DOT helmet can be the difference between "living" as a vegetable or having a normal life. A full-face helmet can further improve the odds in your favor, and if you spend time shopping, you can find one that is actually more comfortable than riding bareheaded. Though a jacket, boots, gloves, etc. can reduce your injuries, those are not likely to attenuate injuries of the life-changing sort, though a back protector could conceivably prevent a spinal injury. I'd say gloves, which might prevent grinding off part of a finger, are the second most-important apparel items, but all good apparel is worth its cost because it makes riding more comfortable.

3. Practice, Practice, Practice

You can practice your skills every time you ride. Brake hard every time you come to a stop without a car behind you. Practice weaving quickly between lane lines or around tar spots. Cruiser riders should be comfortable dragging their bikes' footrests in corners so they can use the available lean angle when they need it. These exercises will make you better able to ride your bike to its limits in a crisis.

4. Ride Every Day

A new rider's skills should be exercised frequently. If you only ride on weekends, your abilities will atrophy between rides, and you will have to rebuild them the next time you ride. Riding to work or riding every evening or morning will make you a better rider in fewer miles than just riding occasionally.

5. See & Be Seen

Pick your lane position so you can see the road ahead and the places from which other cars might emerge. On straight roads, position yourself to see around the vehicle in front of you or, if there isn't one, close to the center of the road so you have earlier warning of cars, kids and animals coming onto the road. Right to the outside of the road to see as far as possible around a curve. Approaching an intersection where cars might pull out, ride so you can see them and your presence isn't hidden by moving or parked cars or roadside objects. In most cases, positioning yourself to detect threats ahead also means that they can see you, but be aware of things like glare when the sun is rising or setting behind you, blind spots of cars, and the possibility that your narrow silhouette can be hidden by the window pillars as you approach a car.

6. Avoid Riding with Groups

Going somewhere with a group probably seems safer, but the dynamics of group riding make it much more risky than riding solo. You may also have to deal with riders who are less skilled than you are or have been drinking. Wait until you are completely comfortable on your bike before taking on this challenge.

7. Back to School

Plan on taking an Experienced Rider Course within a year and preferably about six months after you start riding or right away if you are returning. Remember that there will probably be a waiting list, and you may want to sign up even before you start riding. This course will help you expand your skills and give you a chance to have your riding habits critiqued before bad habits take hold. After that, one of the racetrack schools is a good way to expand your skills, even if you ride a cruiser.

8. Read Up

There are plenty of books to help you evaluate and expand your riding skills and strategies. I'd recommend "The Motorcycle Safety Foundation's Guide to Motorcycling Excellence" from Whitehorse Press (800-531-1133 or 603-356-6556). There are also good books by David Hough, Nick Ienatsch, Keith Code and others (check one of the online bookstores), and most of Motorcycle Cruiser's past "Survival" articles are available in this section of MotorcycleCruiser.com. These are all nourishing food for thought, practice and coaching. But you should also be wary of what you read on the internet. There is also a lot of BS out there. Assertions that helmets interfere with vision or hearing or break necks are completely disproved by valid research, and the popular claim that loud pipes save lives doesn't hold water either.

9. Approach New Situations Slowly

Some common motorcycling activities require some adjustment and learning. In addition to riding with a group, these include carrying a passenger and traveling long distances on your motorcycle. Find a safe place to practice carrying a passenger before you venture into traffic. Take some shorter trips on your bike before you head for the third state over, and allow time on your initial long rides for repacking, dealing with aches, and making adjustments. Long trips are great for becoming intimate with your motorcycle, however, so don't avoid them.

10. Keep Your Bike in Good Shape

Regularly performing a pre-ride walk-around check of your bike will teach you both how it works and what needs periodic adjustment as well helping you to catch something that has a problem before it becomes a safety threat. Tires are the most commonly ignored mechanical component, so make sure the pressures are per the manual. However, loose chains and improperly adjusted clutch, brakes, and control positions can also affect your motorcycle control. You might want to ask your dealer's service department about these things if the manual leaves you uncertain of how to handle them.

11. Don't Drink and Ride

This should go without saying, but I will anyway because so many riders still do it. Over a third of the people who get dead on motorcycles did some drinking shortly before. Even one beer is too much. Sometimes the difference between a ride in the ambulance and merely elevating your respiratory rate is millimeters and microseconds of reaction time, which that one brew will use up. Save alcoholic refreshment for after the ride—and well before the next one. And be aware that you can become impaired by all sorts of other situations and substances from OTC medications, to exhaust fumes in the Lincoln tunnel to thin air going over Independence Pass or simple fatigue.

If you habitually do these things, your skills will improve quicker than most new riders' and you will develop habits that will serve you as long as you ride and make your riding even more enjoyable.

If you have questions or comments about this article, email the author at Art.Friedman@primedia.com or at ArtoftheMotorcycle@hotmail.com.

For more information on safe-riding equipment, strategies, techniques and skills, see the Street Survival section of MotorcycleCruiser.com.