

STREET SURVIVAL 101

Want to stay alive on the road? Hey, who doesn't? Here are 32 tips that will help you ride smarter this season, culled from the experienced riders and motorcycle safety instructors on the American Motorcyclist Association staff.

Some of what you find here is right out of the rider-training manual. Some of it comes from combined riding experience that amounts to centuries. Either way, we think you'll find plenty of practical tips you can use when riding.

Every time you ride, ***give your motorcycle a quick visual inspection*** for things like loose parts, leaking fluids or obviously low tire pressures. Regularly, give it a more complete check, using all the necessary tools.

Clear your mind before you even start your bike. We all get preoccupied by work, issues at home, even the outcome of a basketball game. But when you're on the bike, you have to focus on riding. Each time you switch on the ignition key, switch on your brain, too.

From the moment you get on the road, train yourself to use the Motorcycle Safety Foundation's ***SEE*** method for staying out of trouble: ***Search*** aggressively for potential hazards. ***Evaluate*** and anticipate problems, "what if..." ***Execute*** -adjust speed, position, and communicate your intentions. Do it all the time, and you'll drastically reduce the number of dangerous situations you face.

Another exceptionally valuable technique is also one of the simplest: ***Look where you want to go***, because the bike will go where you look. Don't stare at that upcoming pot-hole; instead, look at the clear pavement next to it. Don't focus on the car turning left in front of you, instead, focus on the opening being created as it moves past, since that is your escape route. At times, it may take a real mental effort to pull your eyes away from an obstacle, but if you can see your way through trouble, chances are you can ride there.

It should go without saying, but ***don't get on your bike if you've been drinking.*** Your odds of being involved in an accident go up enormously.

If you're on a bike that's new to you, or you're riding under unfamiliar conditions (mountain roads, rain, etc.), you're statistically more likely to crash. Slow down, focus and take extra care.

Need to tune up your skills after a winter layoff or to get more comfortable on the new bike? Find a deserted parking lot and ***do some tight figure-eights and brake tests*** before you face the real world. Keep at it till you feel truly in control of the machine.

Be aware that nailing the brakes isn't the only way to avoid a crash. Sometimes, ***swerving or even speeding up*** will get you out of trouble more easily.

Remember that in the famous Hurt Study in 1981, ***the most common accident situations*** involved a car violating a motorcyclist's right of way. Things have changed a lot in the years since, but cars turning left in front of you or pulling into your path from a parking lot or side street remain

particularly common hazards. Ride like drivers don't see you in those circumstances, because they may not.

With those kinds of hazards in mind, *play the "what-if" game* as you ride. What if the car you're following slams on its brakes? What if the car on the cross street doesn't stop for the stop sign? What if the truck on your right suddenly swerves into your lane: Could you avoid it?

What's the best lane position for riding: The left tire track? The right tire track? The center? You can get all kinds of answers, but your real priority shouldn't be lane positioning at all. I should be "traffic positioning." Try to *create a bubble of space around you*. If there's a car exiting a parking lot on your right, move to the left. If there's an oncoming car that could turn left, move right. If there's traffic around you, position yourself so you have the maximum cushion on all sides.

On crowded freeways, *the most dangerous place to be is often the right lane*, where cars are constantly merging in and out. If you don't need to exit anytime soon, traffic positioning tells you that you're probably better off in the left lane, away from all the merging action. But don't get over there unless you're comfortable with the speed of traffic in the left lane -you don't want to trade the hazards of merging cars for the hazards of faster cars closing in on your tailpipe.

Most traffic tends to move in clumps, separated by open spaces. Instead of rolling along in the middle of a clump, speed up or slow down to get yourself into one of the open spaces.

You can use traffic positioning in other ways as well. On crowded roads, don't just stare at the back of the car in front of you. Put yourself in a position where you can *look through its windshield* at cars farther ahead. Or move to a spot that lets you see around a truck or car that blocks your vision.

Changing lanes? Always *use your head*. Swivel your neck to check your blind spot so you don't change lanes into someone else.

In general, it's easier to *change lanes into a spot that's in front of you*, rather than behind you. See your spot, flip on your turn signal, do your head check and accelerate into it.

Remember that all other vehicles have blind spots, too. This is a particular problem around semi-trailers. As a demonstration, organizers at a recent rally placed four police cruisers and 28 motorcycles behind and to both sides of a parked semi. Not one could be seen from the driver's seat. *If you can't see the driver's rearview mirrors, the driver can't see you*.

Want to improve the odds that other drivers will see you? *Don't where black*. Bright-colored riding clothes can make you more visible anytime, while a yellow or orange rain suit, with reflective stripes, will help you stand out when visibility is at its poorest.

Be aware of seasonal hazards. In winter, ice and snow are the obvious problems, but *salt can also reduce your traction* long after the snow is gone. In spring, *road conditions are at their* worst -

watch for cars swerving to avoid potholes. In summer heat, highway ***crack sealer can turn very slippery***. And in fall, *wet leaves are among the slickest surfaces known to man*.

Construction zones are another hazard associated with summer. If you find yourself on a multi-lane road that's being paved and one lane is an inch or so higher than the other, try to ride ***in the higher lane***. It's easier to move from high to low than the other way around.

Be equally aware of hazards associated with different times of the day. In the early morning, ***watch for dew and frost on roads***. Through the daylight hours, you have to contend with ***sun glare and the highest traffic loads of the day***. Sunset is the time when ***animals are more active***, while evening and overnight hours bring the ***greatest risk of drunk drivers***. You can probably add hazards of your own. For instance, it seem the closer you get to quitting time on Friday, the more self-absorbed and rushed the drivers of other vehicles get.

Sunset and sunrise can create severe visibility problems. If you can see your own shadow ahead of you, ***the drivers of oncoming cars will be staring right into the sun. Anticipate that they can't see you***.

Of course, rain is a hazard anytime. Be aware that ***roads will be slickest*** shortly after it starts raining as the water combines with oil on the road surface. Especially slick are lane markers and other lines painted on the road.

Riding with a group of motorcyclists can be fun, but remember to ***ride your own ride***. If you're not comfortable with the pace, slow down. Don't rely on anyone else to make safety decisions for you.

Alone or in a group, if you're doing something on your motorcycle that ***makes you feel like you're in over your head***, you probably are. Back off.

What's the most dangerous animal in America? Bears? Wolves? Sharks? Not even close. ***More people are killed in collisions with deer*** than in all types of animal attacks. Remember that if you see one deer cross the road, chances are good there are more where that one came from. Slow down and look for the second, third and fourth members of the group.

The most dangerous places on surface streets are intersections. As you approach an intersection, scan in all directions so you know what's likely to happen. But before you slow down, also ***check your mirrors*** to see what's coming up behind you.

Be especially careful when you come up behind a car that's turning left at an intersection. Oncoming cars may not see you and they're more likely to turn left in front of you.

When you stop at an intersection, *leave enough room between you and the car in front* so that you can pull to the left or right in an emergency. *Keep your bike in first gear*, so you're ready to take evasive action if a car behind you isn't going to stop in time.

Parking garages and toll booths have a different hazard - those automatic traffic-control arms. They can be notorious for *not going up quickly enough or dropping too soon*. One solution is to look for a lane with a human being who will take your money and actuate the gate.

Get additional training. Even the best riders can benefit from enrolling in formal rider education programs.

Finally, if you're feeling tired during a long day on the road and can't decide whether you should stop and take a break, that's sure sign that you should *stop and take a break*.

The above information was taken from an article entitled "Ride Smart" in the April 2003 edition of AMERICAN MOTORCYCLIST magazine. It is also available on the American Motorcycle Association web site: www.AMADirectlink.com