

How to Behave on a Bike

by Joseph D. Younger

Getting fit, cutting congestion, curbing pollution, fighting the high cost of gas or just having fun—all of these reasons help explain the recent explosive growth of bicycling. In New York City, for instance, the number of bicyclists has doubled in the past two decades, and everywhere a lot more people are pedaling to places where they used to drive before.

But as the number of bikes on the road increases, so does the possibility for conflict with cars and other vehicles. You can minimize your conflicts—and maximize safety for everyone—by taking these tips.

• **Wear the right gear.** Start at the top, with the single most important piece of safety equipment for any cyclist of any age or experience level: a helmet. Of the 540,000 cyclists who wind up in emergency rooms every year, one in eight suffers a head injury. Worse yet, 70 percent of all fatal bike crashes involve head injuries. In a crash, helmets reduce the risk of traumatic brain injury by 85 to 88 percent.

A good helmet fits snugly and rests low on your forehead, leaving about two fingers' width between the brim and your brow. Most importantly, it has a sticker from the Consumer Product Safety Commission, American Society for Testing & Materials, or Snell (the Snell Memorial Foundation, a nonprofit standards and testing organization). And, of course, it doesn't work unless you buckle it.

Finally, light- or bright-colored clothing—especially the reflective kind—helps drivers and pedestrians see you, day and night.

• **“Drive” your bike like a car.** As a wheeled vehicle, a bicycle has rights—and responsibilities—equal to those of a car or truck. “Bicyclists have the right to use the

road,” says Joshua Poppel, executive director of the New York Bicycling Coalition. “But they also need to follow the law as much as everyone else on the road.” That means obeying traffic signs, signals and markings, just as a car would.

Still, many cyclists behave as if the rules of the road don't apply to them—an attitude that really gets drivers peeved. “The most common complaint I hear from motorists is that cyclists just do their own thing and ignore stop signs, red lights and other traffic signals,” says Karen Blackburn, an instructor for AAA New York's Driver Improvement Program.

Some cyclists justify such behavior by pointing out their vulnerability. Grossly outnumbered, outweighed and overpowered by cars, they feel the need to take every edge that they can get, even if it means breaking the law. So, for example, they might slip through a red light when there's no cross traffic, just to get a head start on the cars waiting for it to turn green. The maneuver buys the cyclists a half-block of peace when they don't have to think about vehicles overtaking them. According to their reasoning, breaking the letter of the law in such a situation actually contributes to safety.

Poppel takes issue with those safety claims. “I've never seen statistics to back up the claim that running red lights in that situation makes cyclists safer,” he says. “Potentially, you still put yourself in danger, because cars still have to pass you—if not at the intersection, then a half block later.”

In fact, violating the rules of the road increases the risk of a crash, emphasizes Blackburn. And if the threat of a crash doesn't scare you, then the threat of a fine might; cyclists who violate the law can get

a traffic ticket, the same as a driver would (see our response to a AAA member's question about bicycle traffic laws on page 6).

• **Stay off sidewalks.** Local ordinances usually prohibit all but young cyclists from using sidewalks, since a bike presents a real hazard to pedestrians who don't expect to come in contact with a bike. But even in less heavily trafficked suburban areas that might permit sidewalk cycling, bikes belong on the roadway for safety's sake. For instance, a driver backing out of a driveway might not see a bicyclist riding on the sidewalk until it's too late. “Adults may feel safer riding on the sidewalk, rather than in the road, but this perception can be misleading,” notes Poppel. “Not only is there a visibility issue associated with riding on sidewalks, but it also confuses the protocol of when and how bicyclists interact with motor vehicles.”

• **Light up at dusk and dawn.** In New York, state law requires a bicycle to have a white light visible at least 500 feet in front and a red taillight visible at least 300 feet in back—not only at night, but also 30 minutes before sunset and 30 minutes before sunrise.

• **Communicate, communicate, communicate.** For a bicycle—or for any other vehicle, for that matter—sharing the road safely requires every road user to conduct themselves in a predictable manner. Other people must know exactly what to expect from you on a bike: riding with traffic as far to the right as you deem safe, signaling for turns and stops, yielding to pedestrians and using turn lanes just as any other vehicle would. Make eye contact with other drivers to be sure that they see you and know your intentions. “Cyclists and motorists alike need to be conscious and aware of each other's presence on the road,” says Blackburn. “Sharing the road is just that—sharing.”

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