

Improving Your Odds

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A car-on-bike collision is probably the greatest fear of cyclists. And that's not surprising, because the repercussions can be so serious. In fact, it turns out that many drivers have the same fear of car-on-bike collisions, and that fear is a motivating factor in much of the bias against cyclists. Strange, but true.

Although the consequences of a car-on-bike collision can be catastrophic, most bike accidents are solo crashes, and most of those are just crashes involving kids learning how to ride. Serious crashes, particularly serious crashes involving cars, are a relatively rare event. However, the near-misses that every cyclist is familiar with are reminders of just how quickly things can go from good to bad.

The good news is there's a lot you can do to keep your rides safe. Taking some safety precautions won't guarantee your safety, but it will significantly improve your odds.

One thing that is often overlooked in discussions about bicycle safety is the mechanical condition of your bike. This can be a factor in some crashes, and therefore, a safe bike ride should begin with a bike that is in safe riding condition.

Anything else? Yes. I always ride with a mirror. On my racing bike, I have a mirror that attaches at the bar end. It's small, light, and unobtrusive, but it's very easy to use for monitoring traffic behind me while riding. I also ride with a bell on my cruiser, because not every crash involves an inattentive driver; sometimes you have to let a pedestrian or another cyclist know you're approaching.

If you will be doing any riding under low light conditions, you will need to be equipped with lights and reflectors. There are two things you need to know here—what "low light conditions" means, and what equipment you should have. First, "low light conditions" obviously includes nighttime. If you are riding at night, you need lights and reflectors—it's required by law. It's also essential for helping drivers to see you. But "low light conditions" means more than just "nighttime." It really means any period of time when visibility is reduced; for example, during fog, or during a heavy rain or snow storm. So the rule is, if visibility is reduced, the law requires you to be equipped with a front white light, and a red rear reflector, plus whatever side reflectors the law in your state requires. But the truth is, the law doesn't require enough—you really need a red rear light, in addition to whatever reflectors are required. And here's something else to think about—it has become standard practice for motorcyclists to ride with their lights on even during the day. Why? Because they have the same problem with "I didn't see him"

drivers that we do. You're not required to do this, but there's no reason that you can't ride with lights during the day too, if you want to.

One more thing that will help drivers see you—bright clothing. You are not required by law to wear bright colors or reflective material. However, wearing "hi-viz" clothing will help drivers see you better; studies have demonstrated that the distance at which drivers see you (and thus, the amount of time the driver has to react) increases dramatically when the cyclist is wearing bright clothing.

Finally, always obey the traffic laws. There are a couple of good reasons you should be doing this. First, it can help prevent collisions. I see a lot of reports of bicycle crashes, and failure to observe the law is a major factor in those crashes in which the cyclist is at fault (two examples I've seen recently: cyclists running stops and getting hit, and cyclists riding into the paths of oncoming trains). You might think that you can decide when it's safe to break the law, and when it's not safe, but the cyclists who broke the law and crashed were thinking the same thing.

The second reason to obey the traffic laws is because if you are breaking the law, and a crash occurs as a result of that, you will be "at fault," and that can dramatically affect your ability to be compensated for your injuries.

Some people have very different attitudes before they are injured, and after they are injured. Before they are injured, they may believe that they will just tough out whatever happens if they are injured. After they are injured, and dealing with the reality of serious, and perhaps permanent injuries, and the medical bills and other costs that come with that, their attitudes change, and they want to be compensated for their injuries. But by that time, it's too late to obey the law. If a crash does occur, you will want the driver, and not you, to be the one at fault. So, to protect yourself legally, you need to make obeying the law a regular part of your riding habits.