

Staying safe while biking in traffic

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[The Chicago Tribune: Staying safe while biking in traffic](#)

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Biking in traffic isn't as treacherous as it might seem. Cyclists rarely get mowed down by motorists from behind — a common fear — and in fact, most accidents don't involve motor vehicles at all.

The more common threats are often found where you might least expect them: on car-free paths filled with distracted pedestrians, dog walkers, in-line skaters and cyclists with varying skill levels.

Still, when bike riders do collide with a car, it's often serious. In 2009, 630 U.S. cyclists were killed in crashes with motor vehicles, according to the Pedestrian and Bicycle Information Center (PBIC) (bicyclinginfo.org). Meanwhile, more than 500,000 cycling accidents result in a trip to the emergency room each year.

Common sense is your best defense when riding the roads:

Don't ride drunk. One-third of all cycling fatalities involved a legally intoxicated cyclist, according to cycling attorney and cyclist Bob Mionske.

Ride with traffic — never against it — as close as possible to the right.

Don't ride with headphones. Hearing the "click" of a car door could save you.

If you're still feeling anxious but want to reap the benefits of an efficient, inexpensive and healthy mode of transportation, here are some ways to reduce your risk of an accident:

Be safe

Don't hit the road without a helmet: Some suggest that helmeted riders take more risks. But [head injuries](#) are responsible for about three-quarters of deaths among bicyclists involved in crashes; wearing one can reduce the risk of a head or brain injury by approximately two-thirds or more, according to a research review.

Safety tips: Make sure it's not on backward! The helmet should cover your forehead. When you look up, you should see the helmet's front edge.

Wearing a baseball cap or hair clips can interfere with fitting; meanwhile the steel ball at the top of the baseball cap can concentrate the force of an impact in one spot, according to the Bicycle Helmet Safety Institute, which has detailed fitting instructions at bhsi.org.

Replace your helmet every three to five years: The sun's ultraviolet rays weaken the glues, resins and other materials used in helmet production. Sweat and hair products can also reduce a helmet's effectiveness, according to the Snell Foundation, which certifies helmets. If you crash — or the outside of your helmet is foam or cloth instead of plastic — get a new one. "A helmet is good for one hit," said Emily Furia, senior editor at Bicycling Magazine and the author of "The Big Book of Cycling."

Easton Bell Sports will replace Bell and Giro helmets at a 30 percent discount and offers free shipping. If you feel like your helmet has gotten big over time and have added pads, that's a sign it's losing its protective ability. Finally, dropping your helmet shouldn't hurt it but don't spike it.

Safety tip: The helmet should be approved by the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission, the ASTM or the Snell Foundation.

Be predictable

Be predictable: Ride in a straight line — and hold it while checking over your shoulder. Don't weave in and out of cars. If there are potholes, the street isn't wide enough to share safely or you see a row of parked cars, it may be safer to temporarily "take the lane," or to boldly ride in the middle of the street, said Furia.

Safety tip: Taking the lane works in urban areas where the traffic is not moving fast. If you can't keep pace with the cars, get out of the way as soon as you can. Expect car horns.

Be seen

Be visible: Some evidence suggests that riding at night — at least without a light — is a factor in nearly half of all cycling fatalities, Mionske wrote in his book, "Bicycling & The Law." (bicyclelaw.com) To reduce your risk, limit riding to daylight hours and wear fluorescent colors to increase the distance that drivers can see you. Use white lights in the front and red in the rear, as well as reflectors and reflective clothing. By law, you must ride with a light at night; if you flout this, you could be liable for your injuries, according to Mionske.

Safety tips: "Buy lights and reflectors at your local bike shop where you can test the various models," Mionske said. For a rear light, Mionske likes the Radbot 1000 from Portland Design Works. (ridepdw.com) The rear light doubles as a reflector, just in case the battery drains while you're on a ride.

Assume drivers are blind: Also, assume car drivers are drunk and multitasking — talking on the phone or texting — which is often the case when an automobile hits a cyclist. Colorful clothing can increase your visibility, but it can also lead to a false sense of security. Drivers often don't see cyclists because they aren't looking for them, said psychology professor Dan Simons. Getting more cyclists on the road could help. "Bicyclists and

pedestrians are less likely to be hit by cars in cities that have greater numbers of cyclists and pedestrians," said Simon, co-author of "The Invisible Gorilla: How Our Intuitions Deceive Us."

Safety tip: "If you commute into the sun at dawn or sunset, wear a red or deep orange top," said Dave "Mr. Bike" Glowacz, the author of "Tricks and Tips for Urban Cyclists." "Don't wear white because sun-blinded motorists won't see you," he said.

Dodge the door: Though striking the door as you ride past can certainly hurt, "getting nailed by a passing vehicle is far more deadly," said Mionske. Ride outside the door zone, which means keeping a distance of 3 to 5 feet between your handlebars and the parked vehicles. Again, you may have to "take the lane," which is a cyclist's right in most states, said San Francisco attorney Miles Cooper.

Safety tip: Look for silhouettes or movement inside the car, said Cooper. "Look for taillights that have just gone out — those frequently indicate a driver is just about to get out of the car," he said. Watch mirrors and listen for a door opening.

Be vigilant

Anticipate accidents: "Assume that the car coming in the opposite direction will turn left in front of you, and be prepared to slow down to avoid it," said David Scharff, an internist at Mercy Hospital in Baltimore. "Know where the car behind you is, so when you move out to avoid the pothole or rain grate or parked car opening its door, you have plenty of room to glide in front of the car or behind the car to take up the lane," said Scharff, who is also a bike racer and commuter. "Don't get yourself pinned in."

Safety tip: If you see a car turning into your path, go with the flow and turn right into the lane with the vehicle, even if you weren't planning to go that way. "Intersections, including at driveways, are the most dangerous section of the road for cyclists," said Mionske.

Send a signal

Legally, cyclists must signal a turn unless doing so would make them fall off the bike, said Mionske. At the same time, don't assume drivers will signal right hand turns.

To signal a left, point your left arm straight to the left.

To signal a right, point your right arm straight to the right.

To stop, point your left arm, bent at a right angle, hand pointing down. Signal about 100 feet before turning.