

Coexisting With Bicyclists: 10 Rules for Drivers

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Love Them or Hate Them, Cyclists Have Road Rights

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Horrific accidents involving bicyclists and drivers have made headlines recently, including a 2010 collision between an SUV and a bicycle in Largo, Maryland. On the bike was 30-year-old law student and Green Party candidate Natasha Pettigrew. The driver thought she had struck a deer and kept driving, according to news reports. Pettigrew later died from the injuries.

Traffic accidents involving bicyclists and vehicles killed 630 people in the U.S. in 2009, the latest available figures from the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA). Another 51,000 bicyclists were injured, sometimes critically.

Bicycling advocates say drivers can play a big role in reducing those grim statistics, paving the way for peaceful coexistence. It's a two-way street, of course. Bicyclists have responsibilities, just as drivers do.

For this story, Edmunds.com asked bicycling advocates, bicycling-accident attorneys and other experts to give their recommendations on how drivers can coexist more peacefully with bicyclists. In a companion story, we'll outline bicyclists' responsibilities. But for you drivers, here are our 10 rules of the road for driving near bicyclists.

1. Appreciate Bicyclist Vulnerability: A car weighs 2 tons or so, while the average bike is a mere 20 pounds, says Tim Blumenthal, president of [People for Bikes](#), an advocacy group.

"In any collision, any physical interaction between car and bike, the bike always loses," he says. "I've never seen a collision where the bike rider came out less injured," he says.

Gary Brustin, a bicycle accident attorney in Santa Monica and San Jose, California, says he has seen the severity of the injuries to cyclists increase in recent years. Among the factors driving the increase, he suspects, are older riders, including baby boomers, whose bones may be more fragile than those of younger riders. An increase in high-speed roads with bike lanes also

contributes to the rise, he says.

2. Know Bicyclists' Rights: Drivers sometimes have little idea of the traffic laws that apply to bicyclists. A recent visitor to a message board discussing cyclists and motorists wanted to know why cyclists can't just use the sidewalks.

In fact, bicycles in the roadway are considered vehicles. NHTSA says cyclists 10 years and older should behave as though they were vehicles on the street, riding in the same direction as other traffic that's going their way and following the same traffic rules.

The cyclists, then, are on the same level as motorists. Information on the California Department of Motor Vehicles Web site spells out the law in the Golden State: "Bicycle riders on public roads have the same rights and responsibilities as motorists, and are subject to the same rules and regulations."

The site encourages drivers to "look carefully for bicyclists before turning left or right, merging into bicycle lanes and opening doors next to moving traffic. Respect the right-of-way of bicyclists because they are entitled to share the road with you."

Nearly every state has similar language covering bicyclists, says Andy Clarke, president of the [League of American Bicyclists](#).

3. Adjust That Attitude: Motorists tend to think of cyclists as "in their way," Clarke says. Rather, they should think of them as equals, just as entitled to the roadway as drivers are, says Clarke and other experts in the cycling community.

Drivers who get impatient with bicyclists might want to stop for a moment and think about the human being on that bike, says **Bob Mionske**, a Portland cycling attorney and cyclist: What if that rider was my friend, a friend of a friend, or a neighbor? Somehow, seeing bicyclists that way makes people a little more patient, he says. When drivers don't humanize cyclists this way, he finds, they often perceive riders as mere objects.

If you can pinpoint the moment when a bicyclist is starting to irritate you — because you can't see where he is going or because he's moving slowly and is making you late — picture him as a family member or friend. That might calm you down, Mionske says.

4. Consider the Benefits of Bicycling — for Drivers: "One cyclist on the road is one less car," Mionske says. Cyclists don't wear out the road, he adds (which means fewer potholes for you). "We lessen traffic congestion," he says. "We can't pollute."

So if you're idling in your car behind a cyclist who you wish would go faster, think of it this way, Mionske says: "Well, he might be in my way temporarily. At least he is not in a vehicle and in my way the whole commute."

5. Spare Them the Right Hook: Intersections are venues for serious car-cycle collisions. Drivers making right turns, especially, should watch out for cyclists. A cyclist may be a little behind and to the right of you, and may

be planning to ride straight ahead. If you don't signal your right turn, you could wind up hitting each other, with the point of contact somewhere on your car's right side. If you are trying to figure out if a nearby cyclist is planning to turn right, look for his raised left hand in a squared position, or an extended right hand.

6. Beware the Left Turn: A driver trying to make a left turn sees an oncoming bicyclist, but the driver figures he has plenty of time to complete the turn. Sometimes, that's not true. Brustin says it's a common scenario: After a collision, a driver often says he didn't realize the cyclist was going that fast.

A bike can easily get to 15- or 20-mile-per-hour speeds, Brustin says. "If in doubt, yield," he says. Exercise the same caution as you would for an approaching vehicle.

7. Give Cyclists 3 Feet of Clearance: Twenty states have now passed laws requiring motorists to give bicycles on the roadway about 3 feet of space, Blumenthal says. "Bike riders really appreciate that," he says. The 3-foot rule helps drivers by giving them a concrete frame of reference, he says.

And thanks to Joe Mizereck of Tallahassee, Florida, that figure is becoming a standard reference. Mizereck took up cycling five years ago and is an avid participant. He says he was so unnerved by a few close calls that he founded the "Three Feet Please" campaign. He sells cycling jerseys emblazoned with the motto. "Everyone who has bought one of these jerseys says, 'It works,'" he says.

On [his site](#), Joe writes: "Please understand, our campaign is not about painting the motorist as the bad guy. Unfortunately, we have scofflaws on both sides and the key is to lay down the rules for all parties to follow, make sure the parties know the rules and then enforce them." Everyone needs to be held accountable, he says, "including cyclists." A list of the states that have passed the 3-foot law is [here](#).

Besides giving cyclists that breathing room, Blumenthal says it's best for drivers to pass them slowly and smoothly. The motorist's tendency is to speed up and get by the cyclists as quickly as possible, he says. "It's pretty unnerving when you are on a bike and a car accelerates." You can also spare cyclists' nerves by honking sparingly, he says.

8. Look Around — but Not at Your Phone: Brustin, who has been handling bicycle injury lawsuits for 20 years, says that drivers who have hit cyclists almost always say the same frightening, sobering thing: "I never saw him before I hit him."

If drivers only expect other cars on the road, they're setting themselves up for dangerous interactions. A model of greater awareness can be seen in the European-style "roundabout," with traffic coming from all directions and merging into a traffic circle. Roundabouts require every participant's attention, as does the more comprehensive "[shared space](#)" concept of traffic design, which uses minimal road signs, crosswalks, lights and barriers and integrates pedestrians, cars and bicycles in the same terrain. The need for heightened interaction, paradoxically, makes everyone safer, traffic-design

experts say.

"Start looking out for everybody," Brustin suggests, including other vehicles, cyclists and pedestrians.

9. Look Before You Exit Your Car: Cyclists are terrified of being "doored." Imagine a rider pedaling along next to a row of parked cars. Suddenly, a driver flings her door open. The impact can send the cyclist flying, and riders have died when they've been thrown into traffic.

"Before you open the door, look out the sideview mirror on the driver side and be sure no one is approaching," Blumenthal says.

While the driver can take a few seconds to look and stay put if a cyclist is approaching, a cyclist has no sure way to anticipate whether a driver inside a parked car is about to open the door. All he can do is scan for drivers who look as though they might be preparing to exit a car.

10. Accept That Bicyclists Are Here To Stay: Bicycling is on the rise. People are taking it up for exercise or to reduce commuting costs. New York City, Portland, Oregon and San Francisco, among other cities, all have seen an increase in commuter cyclists. It's time to make peace with them — for everyone's safety.