

The Los Angeles Times: Bicyclists should stay on the defensive to stay safe

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Bicyclists must obey all the traffic laws that motorists do, but safety tactics may also help riders avoid accidents.



A bike commuter rides amongst cars in L.A. traffic. (Gary Friedman / Los Angeles Times)

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By Christie Aschwanden
November 2, 2009

National Highway Traffic Safety Administration statistics show that the following were five of the most frequently reported fatal bike-vehicle accidents from 2004 through 2008. Here, our urban cycling experts outline the best ways to avoid them -- and offer some other safety tips besides.

Oblivious at the wheel

Situation: At a traffic light or stop sign, the driver obeys the traffic signal

but fails to yield to you, the bicyclist.

Strategy: Don't assume the driver will yield, even if you have the right of way. If it's your turn to proceed at the stop sign, try to make eye contact with the motorist before you move into the intersection. If in doubt, proceed as if you haven't been seen.

The left cross

Situation: A motorist traveling in the opposite direction turns left directly into your path.

Strategy: Slow down as you approach an intersection, and try to make eye contact with drivers who might turn into your path. Try to anticipate their actions and be ready to take evasive maneuvers. If the car turns into your path, turn with them, in the same direction.

The right hook

Situation: A motorist passes you from behind, then slows and makes a right-hand turn directly in front of you.

Strategy: If there's a right-hand turn lane and you're going straight, position yourself in a visible spot in the through-traffic lane. When approaching the intersection, line yourself up in the center of the lane or in queue behind any cars already present so that the car behind you can't pull up to your left and then make a right turn without seeing you. Pulling up to the right side of a stopped car may place you in its blind spot.

The chancy break

Situation: At an intersection, you try to beat a car that has the right of way, perhaps to avoid making a complete stop.

Strategy: Don't take chances. Obey traffic signs and, when in doubt, yield to the motorist. You will never win a battle against a massive hunk of steel.

The driveway exit

Situation: Vehicle exits from a driveway, alley or other mid-block location and pulls out in front of you.

Strategy: Keep a vigilant eye on side traffic and position yourself in a visible part of the lane, not so far to the right that parked cars obscure a driver's ability to see you.

Here are some other tips to help you stay safe on the road.

Be visible: Wear bright clothing and ride in motorists' line of sight, says Liz Elliott, executive director of Cyclists Inciting Change thru Live Exchange (CICLE). Always use a front and rear light at night.

Ride predictably: Never weave in and out of cars or make sudden moves.

Use hand signals to indicate your intentions to motorists, advises Ron Durgin, who teaches bike safety courses for the League of American Bicyclists. "Sometimes I'll hear a motor revving behind me and when I signal that I'm making a right turn, I can hear the motor calming."

Claim your space: Ride too far to the right and you blend into the surroundings. You also put yourself in the risky debris and gutter zone. If the lane is 13 feet wide or narrower, it's generally not shareable, Durgin says, and you're best off claiming your legal right to the entire lane. "If you give cars the space, the average driver will take it and then you get squeezed," he says.

Make eye contact: Never assume the motorist sees you. Even if you're in the line of sight, the driver may not register you, Elliott says. Look for a nod or glance that indicates that you've been seen.

Be wary of parked cars: Ride the distance of a door-length from parked cars and be on the lookout for people inside them, says attorney [Bob Mionske](#), a former Olympic cyclist and author of "[Bicycling and the Law: Your Rights as a Cyclist](#)." Bicyclists have been killed by car doors swinging open. Also look out for parked cars suddenly pulling out into the lane.

Obey traffic laws: "Bicycles have all the rights -- and responsibilities -- of any other vehicle," Mionske says. That means no running stop lights. Ignoring laws could result in a ticket and may also aggravate sentiment against bicyclists.

Ride with, never against, traffic: By law, bicycles are vehicles just like any other and must be operated as such. Ride against traffic and you increase your risk of a head-on collision, especially because motorists don't expect bicycles coming the wrong way, Mionske says.

Wear a helmet and consider using a rear view mirror: A helmet won't prevent an accident, but can save your life in a crash. If you're not comfortable holding a straight line while looking behind you, consider purchasing a rear view mirror to attach to your helmet, Elliott says.

Avoid escalation: Never antagonize motorists, even if they act aggressively. Escalation only increases your risk of injury. When it's you versus 4,000 pounds of steel, the odds are against you, no matter how right you are. "Keep your finger where it belongs: on your handlebars," Mionske writes in "Bicycling and the Law." "If you absolutely must use your finger, use it to dial the police."

Plan your route: Look for back roads and side streets that will get you to your destination without navigating major intersections. You'll avoid traffic and noise, and often the back roads will get you there just as fast as the congested main roads will, Elliott says.