

# MOTORCYCLIST \ MOTORCYCLE TIPS & HOW-TO

## **50 Ways to Save Your Life**

By The Motorcyclist Staff Motorcyclist Magazine, August 2006

*We are what we repeatedly do. Excellence, then, is not an act, but a habit. —Aristotle*

The best bike in the world is scrap—or soon will be—unless you learn how to use it. The most powerful piece of high-performance hardware is between your ears. To help you program it with the right information, we've assembled 50 potentially lifesaving bits of street savvy. Some you'll know, some you won't. All are worth remembering, because when it comes to riding motorcycles on the street, the people over at the Motorcycle Safety Foundation ([www.msf-usa.org](http://www.msf-usa.org)) have the right idea with their tagline: The more you know, the better it gets.

### **1. Assume you're invisible**

Because to a lot of drivers, you are. Never make a move based on the assumption that another driver sees you, even if you've just made eye contact. Bikes don't always register in the four-wheel mind.

### **2. Be considerate**

The consequences of strafing the jerk du jour or cutting him off start out bad and get worse. Pretend it was your grandma and think again.

### **3. Dress for the crash, not the pool or the prom**

Sure, Joaquin's Fish Tacos is a 5-minute trip, but nobody plans to eat pavement. Modern mesh gear means 100-degree heat is no excuse for a T-shirt and board shorts.

### **4. Hope for the best, prepare for the worst**

Assume that car across the intersection will turn across your bow when the light goes green, with or without a turn signal.

### **5. Leave your ego at home**

The only people who really care if you were faster on the freeway will be the officer and the judge.

### **6. Pay attention**

Yes, there is a half-naked girl on the billboard. That shock does feel squishy. Meanwhile, you could be drifting toward Big Trouble. Focus.

### **7. Mirrors only show you part of the picture**

Never change direction without turning your head to make sure the coast really is clear.

### **8. Be patient**

Always take another second or three before you pull out to pass, ride away from a curb or into freeway traffic from an on-ramp. It's what you don't see that gets you. That extra look could save your butt.

### **9. Watch your closing speed**

Passing cars at twice their speed or changing lanes to shoot past a row of stopped cars is just asking for trouble.

### **10. Beware the verge and the merge**

A lot of nasty surprises end up on the sides of the road: empty McDonald's bags, nails, TV antennas, ladders, you name it. Watch for potentially troublesome debris on both sides of the road.

### **11. Left-turning cars remain a leading killer of motorcyclists**

Don't assume someone will wait for you to dart through the intersection. They're trying to beat the light, too.

## **12. Beware of cars running traffic lights**

The first few seconds after a signal light changes are the most perilous. Look both ways before barging into an intersection.

## **13. Check your mirrors**

Do it every time you change lanes, slow down or stop. Be ready to move if another vehicle is about to occupy the space you'd planned to use.

## **14. Mind the gap**

Remember Driver's Ed? One second's worth of distance per 10 mph is the old rule of thumb. Better still, scan the next 12 seconds ahead for potential trouble.

## **15. Beware of tuner cars**

They're quick and their drivers tend to be aggressive. Don't assume you've beaten one away from a light or outpaced it in traffic and change lanes without looking. You could end up as a Nissan hood ornament.

## **16. Excessive entrance speed hurts**

It's the leading cause of single-bike accidents on twisty roads and racetracks. In Slow, Out Fast is the old adage, and it still works. Dialing up corner speed is safer than scrubbing it off.

## **17. Don't trust that deer whistle**

Ungulates and other feral beasts prowl at dawn and dusk, so heed those big yellow signs. If you're riding in a target-rich environment, slow down and watch the shoulders.

## **18. Learn to use both brakes**

The front does most of your stopping, but a little rear brake on corner entry can calm a nervous chassis.

## **19. Keep the front brake covered—always**

Save a single second of reaction time at 60 mph and you can stop 88 feet shorter. Think about that.

## **20. Look where you want to go**

Use the miracle of target fixation to your advantage. The motorcycle goes where you look, so focus on the solution instead of the problem.

## **21. Keep your eyes moving**

Traffic is always shifting, so keep scanning for potential trouble. Don't lock your eyes on any one thing for too long unless you're actually dealing with trouble.

## **22. Think before you act**

Careful whipping around that Camry going 7 mph in a 25-mph zone or you could end up with your head in the driver's side door when he turns into the driveway right in front of you.

## **23. Raise your gaze**

Mirrors only show you part of the picture. Scan 12 seconds ahead for potential trouble. It's too late to do anything about the 20 feet immediately in front of your fender, so scan the road far enough ahead to see trouble and change trajectory.

## **24. Get your mind right in the driveway**

Most accidents happen during the first 15 minutes of a ride, below 40 mph, near an intersection or driveway. Yes, that could be your driveway.

## **25. Come to a full stop at that next stop sign**

Put a foot down. Look again. Anything less forces a snap decision with no time to spot potential trouble.

## **26. Never dive into a gap in stalled traffic**

Cars may have stopped for a reason, and you may not be able to see why until it's too late to do anything about it.

**27. Don't saddle up more than you can handle**

If you weigh 95 pounds, avoid that 795-pound cruiser. If you're 5-foot-5, forget those towering adventure-tourers.

**28. Watch for car doors opening in traffic**

And smacking a car that's swerving around some goofball's open door is just as painful.

**29. Don't get in an intersection rut**

Watch for a two-way stop after a string of four-way intersections. If you expect cross-traffic to stop, there could be a painful surprise when it doesn't.

**30. Stay in your comfort zone when you're with a group**

Riding over your head is a good way to end up in the ditch. Any bunch worth riding with will have a rendezvous point where you'll be able to link up again.

**31. Give your eyes some time to adjust**

A minute or two of low light heading from a well-lighted garage onto dark streets is a good thing. Otherwise, you're essentially flying blind for the first mile or so.

**32. Master the slow U-turn**

Practice. Park your butt on the outside edge of the seat and lean the bike into the turn, using your body as a counterweight as you pivot around the rear wheel.

**33. Who put a stop sign at the top of this hill?**

Don't panic. Use the rear brake to keep from rolling back down. Use Mr. Throttle and Mr. Clutch normally—and smoothly—to pull away.

**34. If it looks slippery, assume it is**

A patch of suspicious pavement could be just about anything. Butter Flavor Crisco? Gravel? Mobil 1? Or maybe it's nothing. Better to slow down for nothing than go on your head.

**35. Bang! A blowout! Now what?**

No sudden moves. The motorcycle isn't happy, so be prepared to apply a little calming muscle to maintain course. Ease back the throttle, brake gingerly with the good wheel and pull over very smoothly to the shoulder. Big sigh.

**36. Drops on the faceshield?**

It's raining. Lightly misted pavement can be slipperier than when it's been rinsed by a downpour, and you never know how much grip there is. Apply maximum level concentration, caution and smoothness.

**37. Emotions in check?**

To paraphrase Mr. Ice Cube, chickity-check yoself before you wreck yoself. Emotions are as powerful as any drug, so take inventory every time you saddle up. If you're mad, sad, exhausted or anxious, stay put.

**38. Wear good gear**

Wear stuff that fits you and the weather. If you're too hot or too cold or fighting with a jacket that binds across the shoulders, you're dangerous. It's that simple.

**39. Leave the iPod at home**

You won't hear that cement truck in time with Spinal Tap cranked to 11, but they might like your headphones in intensive care.

**40. Learn to swerve**

Be able to do two tight turns in quick succession. Flick left around the bag of briquettes, then right back to your original trajectory. The bike will follow your eyes, so look at the way around, not the briquettes. Now practice till it's a reflex.

#### **41. Be smooth at low speeds**

Take some angst out, especially of slow-speed maneuvers, with a bit of rear brake. It adds a welcome bit of stability by minimizing unwelcome weight transfer and potentially bothersome driveline lash.

#### **42. Flashing is good for you**

Turn signals get your attention by flashing, right? So a few easy taps on the pedal or lever before stopping makes your brake light more eye-catching to trailing traffic.

#### **43. Intersections are scary, so hedge your bets**

Put another vehicle between your bike and the possibility of someone running the stop sign/red light on your right and you cut your chances of getting nailed in half.

#### **44. Tune your peripheral vision**

Pick a point near the center of that wall over there. Now scan as far as you can by moving your attention, not your gaze. The more you can see without turning your head, the sooner you can react to trouble.

#### **45. All alone at a light that won't turn green?**

Put as much motorcycle as possible directly above the sensor wire—usually buried in the pavement beneath you and located by a round or square pattern behind the limit line. If the light still won't change, try putting your kickstand down, right on the wire. You should be on your way in seconds.

#### **46. Every-thing is harder to see after dark**

Adjust your headlights, Carry a clear faceshield and have your game all the way on after dark, especially during commuter hours.

#### **47. Don't troll next to—or right behind—Mr. Peterbilt**

If one of those 18 retreads blows up—which they do with some regularity—it de-treads, and that can be ugly. Unless you like dodging huge chunks of flying rubber, keep your distance.

#### **48. Take the panic out of panic stops**

Develop an intimate relationship with your front brake. Seek out some safe, open pavement. Starting slowly, find that fine line between maximum braking and a locked wheel, and then do it again, and again.

#### **49. Make your tires right**

None of this stuff matters unless your skins are right. Don't take 'em for granted. Make sure pressure is spot-on every time you ride. Check for cuts, nails and other junk they might have picked up, as well as general wear.

#### **50. Take a deep breath**

Count to 10. Visualize whirled peas. Forgetting some clown's 80-mph indiscretion beats running the risk of ruining your life, or ending it. -MC