

Rear-End Collisions

We have Chapter members who have been rear-ended by vehicles while they were stationary on their bikes at intersections or in stopped traffic. Addressing this situation is this month's topic.

Intersections are a major safety concern for motorcyclists. Most serious accidents involving a motorcycle and another vehicle occur at intersections. The worst case scenario is a driver turning left in front of an approaching bike, leading to a severe collision. Drivers also run through red lights and STOP signs and hit motorcycles from the left or right. As we have experienced, vehicles hit stopped motorcycles from the rear at intersections and in lines of stopped traffic. For a variety of reasons, some drivers just don't "see" an approaching or stationary motorcycle.

How can we reduce the risk of being rear-ended while stopped? Here are some defensive riding recommendations in this regard.

Always approach an intersection with caution; it is a high risk area. Observe the layout, the traffic signals, the other vehicles in and approaching the intersection, and anything else that might constitute a threat. Always be aware of the vehicles all around you, but in this case, pay special attention to vehicles that are currently behind you or that may switch lanes to come in behind you.

Try to anticipate the timing of the light. If the light is red and the crossing light has turned yellow, you may be able to adjust your speed to arrive at the intersection after the light turns green and proceed, with an abundance of caution, through the intersection without stopping.

A yellow light frequently comes as a surprise and you have to make a quick decision whether to go through it or stop. If you have the time and space, it is generally safer to slow down and stop because it avoids possible conflict with an oncoming vehicle rushing to make a left turn across your path or one turning right from the cross street. However, if you are very near the intersection when the light turns yellow, and there is a vehicle following you, an abrupt stop by you invites a collision.

Try to separate yourself from vehicles that follow you too closely, i.e., establish a space cushion. Slowing down may encourage them to go around you. Change lanes if feasible. Speeding up may provide some separation, but it may not be advisable given the traffic situation.

Look ahead. The earlier you can ascertain that you will have to stop, the sooner you can begin the process. Start slowing your bike well in advance of the intersection or line of stopped or slowing traffic. Except for emergencies, try to avoid abrupt stops in traffic, especially if there is a vehicle following you.

Always signal your intention to slow down to the following vehicle. Flashing your brake lights before braking gets more attention than the steady brake light alone. If you are reducing speed only by gearing down or rolling off the throttle, flashing the brake lights becomes even more important as a signal of your intentions. Extending your left hand down as the conventional hand signal for slowing and stopping also provides information to the driver behind you.

As you approach your stopping point, establish in your mind an escape route that you can use if needed. Stop at least a car length behind a vehicle stopped ahead of you. This allows a space cushion in front of you and facilitates possible use of your predetermined escape route to the left or right of the vehicle.

Monitor the vehicle approaching you from behind in your rear view mirror. Flash your brake lights a few times to become more conspicuous. Keep your bike in first gear and be ready to escape if the vehicle's closure rate and perhaps the sound of its screeching tires indicate that it may not stop in time. If you want to shift to neutral, do so only after the vehicle has come to a complete stop and you feel it is no longer a threat.

There are other things to consider. The risk is increased in heavy traffic and by conditions which affect the approaching driver's vision and your visibility, such as darkness, rain, fog, etc. Glare from the sun can also increase risk. If the sun is in your eyes as you approach the intersection, it is also in the eyes of the driver behind you. Take extra caution in these and similar circumstances.

You can preemptively reduce the risk by making you and your bike more conspicuous from the rear. Add more or brighter lighting, perhaps a brake light that flashes when activated. Wear highly visible and reflective clothing. Put retro-reflective material on the back of your helmet. There is still no guarantee that an inattentive, impaired, or distracted driver will "see" you even then, but at least it's reducing the risk.

Another scenario, that has a potential for you to be rear-ended, is worth mentioning. This can occur when you are stopped at a STOP sign, with a vehicle stopped close behind you, and there is a lot of traffic on the road that you are trying to enter or cross. You wait for a break in the traffic, realizing that your entry onto the road will have to be quick when the brief opportunity presents itself. The driver behind you will notice when you start to make your entry and may immediately move forward to take advantage of the same break in traffic. If for some reason you reconsider your entry and abruptly stop, the driver behind you, whose attention is now fixated on the oncoming traffic, will probably run into you. Try always to be clear about your intentions and be decisive in your actions.

The risk of being rear-ended exists every time we stop at an intersection or in traffic but, of course, we can't predict when it will actually happen. The best way to reduce our risk is to ride defensively all of the time.

The streets are mean. Let's be careful out there.

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