

## Relax and Ride Safely

Did you ever notice during or after a ride that your hands, arms, or shoulders feel tired or uncomfortable? It may be because you have been squeezing the handlebars too tightly and/or tensing your arms and shoulders while you ride. This has negative ramifications regarding your comfort, your riding enjoyment, your riding efficiency, and your safety. Riders should strive to be relaxed while in the saddle.

Some riders regularly ride in a manner that induces tightness and tension in the body. Their habits of squeezing the handlebars tightly or keeping the arms and shoulders rigid become their normal riding posture. This may be accompanied by bad riding posture such as resting your upper body weight on the handlebars. In many cases they may be unaware that this is happening. With conscious effort this can be corrected.

Other riders may be more or less relaxed during some phases of riding but become tense at other times, such as when in traffic, approaching curves, in the rain, etc. The increase in mental alertness that occurs when in challenging circumstances can cause the physical reaction of tension in the body. While an increase in alertness and a readiness for physical action may be appropriate, an increase in physical tension that may accompany it works against the rider.

Tense muscles tire faster than relaxed muscles and this can result in discomfort and reduced endurance. Physical tiredness leads to mental tiredness. This can be a distraction from the rider's ability to do the physical and mental things that are conducive to safe riding.

The front end of a motorcycle vibrates as the front wheel and suspension encounter irregularities in the road. Holding too tightly to the handlebars with stiff arms allows this vibration to be transmitted to the arms and upper body. This is tiring. Relaxed hands and arms reduce this effect. Also, a light grip on the handlebars may allow an experienced rider to sense subtle feedback from the tires and suspension that relates to suspension operation and available traction.

Motorcycles are designed for the front wheel to oscillate slightly back and forth with irregularities in the road. While this action is almost imperceptible while riding, it is necessary for the stability of the bike. Holding the handlebars too tightly resists this natural movement. While this movement is there all of the time, it is especially noticeable on a loose surface like gravel. Riding in gravel with a tight grip and stiff arms makes control of the bike more difficult. A loose grip allows the bike to self-compensate for the slight side to side movement of the front wheel to maintain stability as it was designed to do.

In a curve, rigid arm muscles may work against each other while trying to achieve an appropriate lean. A tense rider interferes with the efficient operation of the bike's steering and suspension and will tend to take a wider arc through a curve than a relaxed rider. The pressure on the handlebars in a curve is best made by the inside hand, with the other hand relaxed. Rigid arms may also detract from the rider's ability to swerve the bike to avoid a hazard in the road. Tense muscles don't react as fast as relaxed ones.

Keith Code, noted motorcycle author and riding instructor, states that “Too tight on the bars is the most common source of motorcycling handling problems.” Relax and the bike will seem to handle better. This is a safety concern.

How does a rider learn to become more relaxed? It takes conscious effort and it may involve adjusting your riding style.

A really good rider tends to be relaxed and smooth in the operation of his motorcycle, including keeping the arms loose while cornering, accelerating, and braking. The rider maintains the ability to stay relaxed and smooth in challenging situations because he has practiced the correct maneuvers for these situations many times and these responses are committed to the rider’s muscle memory. The riding actions, such as negotiating a curve, tend to flow naturally. In contrast, a less experienced rider may actively concentrate his mind on the required maneuver to the degree that his body tenses and he gives the bike’s controls too much input. Being tense works against the rider’s ability to operate his machine. Training the body to relax is worth the effort. Practice being relaxed while you are riding.

Controlled breathing can help. Take a slow deep breath, exhale, pause momentarily, and repeat the breathing cycle a few times. This has a stress reducing effect. Check on your breathing rhythm periodically and adjust it as necessary.

As you ride, check your body periodically to see if it is tense. If your hands are gripping too tightly, flex the fingers a few times and grasp the handlebars with a looser grip. It has been suggested that you grip the handlebars as if you were holding in your hand a small bird that you don’t want to harm.

If your arms and shoulders are rigid, relax them. Have your controls adjusted so that your wrists are in line with your forearms. Ensure that your elbows are comfortably bent, but not locked, and you are not leaning your upper body weight on the handlebars. If your elbows are above your wrists, you are probably not relaxed.

Anything that you can do safely on a moving bike that will loosen cramped muscles is probably worth trying. Drop your shoulders and do some shoulder rolls. Momentarily drop your chin to your chest a couple of times. Turn and lean your head from side to side to loosen the muscles. Move around on the saddle some and stretch out your legs occasionally. When off the bike for a break, walk around a bit, swing your arms, and do some simple stretches. All of this can help the muscles relax when back on the bike.

Motorcycles operate more efficiently when the rider is relaxed. This contributes to your comfort, your riding enjoyment, and your safety. If you are not already a relaxed rider, make the effort to become one. It’s worth doing.

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