

Riding While Impaired

To ride a motorcycle safely, the rider's mind must be clear and his/her body ready for immediate response to critical situations. Anything that impairs the rider's mental and physical abilities increases the risk of having an accident.

A National Highway Transportation Safety Administration study (*DOT HS 811 242*) includes the following in its list of Characteristics of a Safe Rider: "Avoids impairments such as alcohol, drugs, fatigue, distraction, weather extremes (too hot, too cold)." These impairments and others identified by the Motorcycle Safety Foundation (MSF) and other sources are presented below. Some are self-induced. Most can be mitigated. We may consider some of them as mere annoyances, inconveniences, or slight discomforts. In reality, however, they all increase our risk. It is important that we deal with them in a safety context and take them seriously.

Alcohol Consuming alcohol diminishes a rider's visual capabilities, judgment, decision-making ability, coordination, and reaction time, i.e., things specifically required to operate a motorcycle safely. Riding while intoxicated is a no-brainer. Riding after only a few drinks is not any smarter. Alcohol induced confidence and impaired judgment lead to risky behavior. The MSF states that having any amount of alcohol in the body increases the chance of crashing by five times.

Drugs/medicines Many prescription and over-the-counter drugs have side effects that can seriously detract from one's riding ability and safety. These can include drowsiness, dizziness, confusion, lack of coordination, impaired judgment, and many other debilitating effects. We must be aware of how each drug that we take will affect us and plan our rides accordingly. This also applies when we buy something for a temporary condition while we are on a trip. Reading the label about side effects before purchasing the product is a good idea.

Fatigue Riding a motorcycle requires more mental and physical effort than going the same distance in a car. Long rides are a lot more tiring. Vision, mental processes, and reaction times all suffer and safety is jeopardized. Rest, preferably sleep, is recommended rather than stimulants such as caffeine or over-the-counter products.

Drowsiness Unfortunately, being sleepy on a motorcycle is all too common. Many things in addition to medicines or fatigue can cause drowsiness. For those of us with robust eating habits, we can get drowsy while riding after eating high sugar foods at breakfast or lunch. Drowsiness from any reason is a serious threat to our safety. It's best to prevent it, but if it occurs, we should take a break and deal with it.

Heat Dehydration is a serious concern while riding in the heat. Symptoms include light headedness, nausea, and blurred vision. MSF recommends hydrating before you ride and drinking up to a quart of fluid per hour during the ride. Keep skin covered to reduce drying out from evaporation. You may want to try collars and vests that you wear wet to provide cooling to you as the water evaporates. Heat exhaustion is an advanced

stage of dehydration with increased severity of symptoms. Without rehydration and cooling, it can lead to serious heat stroke.

Cold Low temperatures combined with wind chill while riding can create unsafe conditions for the unprepared rider. When the body is chilled and shivering, it's hard to keep the mind on anything else, including taking measures to ride safely. Keep the body well covered while riding and consider wearing electrically heated clothing. Take frequent breaks to warm up. Stretch and move about to keep the blood circulating. Prolonged exposure to the cold can lead to hypothermia, a dangerously low core body temperature, with symptoms that include sleepiness and an extreme chill that turns into general numbness of the body. This is serious. Stop riding and replenish your body heat.

Physical discomfort It's hard to give full attention to defensive riding if your back is hurting or your legs are cramping. These and other physical discomforts can happen on a long ride. Good bike fit and proper riding posture can help prevent them. Taking a break from riding and walking around helps. Stretching exercises before the ride and during breaks can be very beneficial.

Mind distractions Safe riding requires a high degree of mental alertness and concentration. If the mind is preoccupied with weighty thoughts and concerns, it may not be giving sufficient attention to the intense requirements of defensive riding. We should leave our troubles at home, clear our minds, and ride safely.

Emotions A nice relaxing motorcycle ride is a great way to relieve stress. However, riding while our minds are preoccupied with anger or stress and trying to work it out through aggressive riding and risk-taking behavior is not in our best interest. Aggressive riding is not safe riding. A slow angry walk is safer than a fast angry ride.

Hurry There is a saying, "It's ok to ride fast, but don't ride in a hurry." Being in a hurry can lead us to aggressive riding and taking risks that we would not normally take. Our mental focus is on getting to the destination quickly and not on the orderly process of defensive riding. This increases our risk. We should try to avoid such situations.

Gadget fixation We complain all of the time that car drivers are distracted by their GPS, cell phones, radios, etc. Don't let it happen to us. If we must direct our visual and mental attention to a gadget while riding, and there is no opportunity to pull over, we should do it with the shortest possible distraction and in an area of minimum hazards.

The purpose of this article is to emphasize that there are many things that can challenge our mental and physical capacities to ride safely. It is also to remind us that motorcycle safety, as in many aspects of life, is largely about choices. In most cases we can choose not to be impaired. Or, if impaired, we can choose not to ride. If somehow we can't avoid riding with impairment, we should at least acknowledge it to ourselves and note the increased safety risk. We should try to reduce the effects of impairment if possible. Then try to be extra cautious as we ride. In dealing with impaired riding, we do have options. Our safety is up to us.

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