

Riding in the Winter

We ride our motorcycles for enjoyment. This does not stop just because winter arrives. However, we should take some precautions to keep our rides enjoyable and safe.

Check the weather for your planned route. If the forecast calls for extreme cold or precipitation that may make for slippery roads, choosing not to ride may be prudent. Remember that temperatures that feel moderate while standing still can become very cold at riding speeds. If you do ride, pay attention to changing conditions. Turning around, seeking shelter, or changing plans may be in order if bad weather is approaching or road conditions become bad. The winter days are short and if the ride somehow extends into the darkness, all of the safety concerns related to night riding also come into play.

Taking measures to stay warm is important. Low temperatures combined with wind chill while riding can create unsafe conditions for the unprepared rider. When the rider's mind is on his chilled and shivering body, his reactions slow and he is mentally distracted from the defensive riding strategy required for safety. Prolonged exposure to the wind and cold can lead to frostbite of exposed skin. The cold can also lead to hypothermia, a dangerously low core body temperature, with symptoms that include confusion, sluggishness, poor muscle coordination, and incoherent behavior. The rider is now beyond mere distraction and is physically impaired. This is a serious condition. If you detect this condition, stop riding and replenish the rider's body heat.

A rider can prepare himself to ride safely and reasonably comfortably in all but the most extreme cold. The standard advice is to dress in layers, with windproof outer garments and multiple insulating layers underneath. Adding or removing inner layers provides flexibility in adjusting to temperature changes. The head and neck are very susceptible to heat loss and should be well protected. The face should be protected from the wind. Motorcycle riding glasses with foam insulation around the frames can insulate the eyes from the cold. Also protect the legs, hands and feet with appropriate apparel. Electrically heated clothing can keep your body parts warm without the bulk of many layers of insulation. Take frequent breaks in warm places. Stretch and move about to keep the blood circulating. Drink warm liquids. Drink to avoid dehydration.

In spite of our best efforts, we may be on a ride and find that it is colder than we anticipated. If you are still cold after putting on all of your insulating layers of clothing, consider putting on your raingear. It helps block the wind and creates an additional insulating air space. If you are still cold, stuff newspapers inside of your jacket. Air-activated chemical packets are good to have along for emergency warmth. The small ones can fit in boots and gloves and the larger ones can go in inside jacket pockets.

Since the cold wind is a primary culprit, any equipment on the bike which blocks the wind helps prevent discomfort from the cold. Fairings and windshields are almost a necessity for winter riding. Soft lower fairings can be installed to divert wind around the legs and wind deflectors can be mounted in front of the hands. Electrically heated grips

on the bike can keep hands warm and allow the use of thinner gloves for more dexterity. Use an anti-fogging product to avoid mist on the inside of your helmet visor.

Since dressing for winter is something we can control, safety concerns for winter riding are more a matter of road conditions than ambient temperature. Leaves on the road can be slippery, especially if they are wet. Potholes abound. A pothole filled with water from rain or melting snow conceals its depth and may appear to be only a puddle. Be cautious. Hitting a pothole can damage your front wheel and may cause loss of control leading to a crash. Road crews put sand on the roads to combat slippery conditions. This sand reduces traction and is especially hazardous where it accumulates in curves.

If we see snow or ice on the roads, presumably we would choose not to ride. Sometimes it is not so obvious and we must remain alert for freezing road conditions. Bridges and overpasses freeze sooner and remain frozen longer than road surfaces. As the sun comes out, it may appear that the frost on the road has disappeared. This may be true for the sunny areas of the road, but tree-lined roads and other shady areas may still be slippery. Be aware of the added risk in these areas and adjust your riding accordingly.

Motorists are even more of a threat than usual. They don't expect to see motorcycles on the road during the winter time so they're less likely to be looking for them. Misty windshields and sun glare make it even harder for them to see us. Be particularly cautious of drivers who may turn left in front of you. Bikers need to be as visible as possible. We should wear highly visible clothing to help drivers see us.

At some point you may get in a situation where you have to ride on slick surfaces. This can be tricky. Reduce speed and ride gently. Ride on the part of the road where your tires get the best grip, maybe between the tracks of other vehicles or near the shoulder. Minimize bike lean in curves and avoid sudden turning, accelerating, or braking actions that require more traction. Putting your weight primarily on the foot pegs may help in controlling the bike.

Winter can be hard on bikes. Have your bike inspected and serviced. Check your bike before each ride. Changing winter temperatures may cause tires to lose pressure and light bulbs to burn out. Winter riding puts more strain on a battery. Use a battery tender to keep it charged. Salt is put on the roads to reduce freezing. Wash it off of your bike to prevent corrosion. Cold tires provide less traction than warm tires because the rubber is harder. Friction with the ground will cause the rubber to warm as you ride. Until the tires are warm, limit high-traction situations as much as possible.

If you store your bike for the winter rather than ride it, there are recommended things to do. Protect it from the weather in a climate controlled storage area or cover it with a waterproof, breathable cover. Connect a battery tender to the battery. Fill the fuel tank and put stabilizer in it. Periodically move the bike so that it sits on different areas of the tires. For the mechanically inclined, much more detailed guidance can be found on the internet. For worry-free winter storage you might want to consider the winter storage package offered by Old Glory Harley-Davidson for a modest monthly fee.

Safety is about choices. We can choose to reduce the risks associated with riding in the winter. We can dress appropriately and ride only when it is reasonable to do so. Winter is a season to be enjoyed in many ways. Our continued safe riding is an important part of that enjoyment.

Ernie Staples Sr.
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