

Motorcycles and Potholes

Every winter and early spring, we have “Pothole Season.” For a car, potholes are a nuisance with some possibility of vehicle damage. For a motorcycle, they can be especially hazardous, threatening damage to the bike as well as grievous injury to the rider. We must take them seriously.

Potholes are formed by the weather and traffic. Water seeps into cracks in the road and freezes. The resulting expansion creates more and bigger cracks. Vehicles ride over the cracks and break up the cracked pavement. As chunks of the road break off and are displaced, potholes form. They vary in size and depth. Potholes can also form along a seam in the pavement and stretch in an elongated pattern across the road or parallel to the flow of traffic. Some potholes are only two inches deep and have a hard paved surface underneath. Unless your tire hits the side of one, these can be dealt with at moderate speeds. Others, however, can be deep and provide serious consequences for hitting them.

Hitting a deep pothole can do significant damage to the front tire and rim of a motorcycle. It is a good idea to stop and examine your bike after a particularly hard encounter with a pothole and maybe even take it to the shop for a further assessment of any possible damage. If hitting the pothole causes you to lose control of the bike and crash, both you and the bike may be damaged.

The best way to deal with potholes is to not hit them. Good riders routinely scan the road ahead as they ride. Because of the possible severe consequences of hitting a pothole, however, routine scanning is not sufficient during pothole season. On a road where potholes are likely to be, we need to heighten our alertness. We must actively and continuously search the road ahead to be aware of any possible indication that there may be one in our path. The farther in advance that you see a pothole, the more time and space you have to evaluate it and execute a strategy to avoid it. Spotting them in advance is not always easy.

If potholes are in the area, ride slower than usual on that stretch of road. Watch for patterns of potholes on the road. Watch the actions of the vehicles in front of you and note if they take maneuvers that suggest that they may be avoiding potholes. When riding in staggered formation, be alert for riders who are riding diagonally in front of you and quickly move laterally into your lane to avoid potholes. Be suspicious of puddles of water. It’s hard to judge the depth of a pothole that is filled or partially filled with water. Also, a significant pothole can remain unseen under what appears to be a shallow puddle.

At times, you will not be able to see the road very far in front of you. If you are following a vehicle, you generally only see the road between you and that vehicle. It may pass over a pothole that will suddenly appear in your immediate path. Don’t follow too closely. As you go over the summit of a hill, a pothole may be right on the other side. Ride in the center of your lane as you crest the summit, so you can maneuver either right or left as needed, moderate your speed, and cover your brakes. When going around a curve and your view of the roadway is limited, moderate your speed, be prepared to stand up the bike for braking, and be prepared to maneuver your bike around a pothole that may suddenly appear before you.

As you approach a pothole, be aware of vehicles behind you and in adjacent lanes before braking or making quick maneuvers. If space and conditions allow, merely take a predetermined path around the pothole. If you encounter a pothole at close range, you may have to swerve around it. Reducing your speed as you approach it may be in order, but be sure to release the brakes before swerving. (Parking lot practice in braking, releasing the brakes, and then swerving is good preparation for these circumstances.) Avoid “target fixation.” Don’t stare at the pothole that you are trying to avoid or you may hit it. Focus your attention on the path around the obstacle rather than on the obstacle itself.

There will be times when hitting a pothole is unavoidable. This can happen if it is not detected in time to maneuver around it, or in many cases, there are multiple potholes sometimes stringing all across your lane. The rules for surmounting an object apply. As you see that you will hit a pothole, the first reaction is to reduce speed. If you have to hit it, it has less impact if you are going slowly. However, release your brakes before you hit it. Otherwise, inertia will move the weight of the bike and you forward to the front wheel and you will hit harder.

Hold the handlebars tightly, so that the force of impact can’t wrest them from your grasp. Straighten the bike and try to hit the pothole so that your wheel is close to 90 degrees with the edge that you hit. If your tire hits the side of the pothole, it can cause loss of control and maybe a crash. It helps to roll on some throttle as you hit the pothole to shift the weight toward the rear wheel. Lift your weight off the seat and use your legs for suspension to cushion the impact shock.

It’s in everyone’s best interest to report egregious potholes so the responsible agency can repair them. In Maryland, roads that are identified by a route number are the responsibility of the Maryland State Highway Administration (SHA). Other roads are maintained by the respective counties. Query online, “Reporting potholes in _____” for appropriate contact numbers and online forms to request service from the various jurisdictions.

Better weather is coming and soon our major pothole concerns will over until next year. Meanwhile, let’s ride safely and enjoy our rides.

Ernie Staples Sr.
Safety Officer
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