

Safety for Seasoned Riders

We are all getting older. Statistics show that the median age of riders has increased in recent years and that older motorcycle riders are involved in a disproportionate number of crashes. Why is this? What can we do about it? The purpose of this article is to increase our awareness of the general effects of aging on the skills required to safely operate a motorcycle, and to note how we might counter or compensate for these effects.

The Motorcycle Safety Foundation (MSF) has developed a training module to address this issue called the *Seasoned Rider Module*. The material in this article is derived mainly from this module. MSF defines a “seasoned rider” as a motorcyclist 40 years of age and older.

We are familiar with MSF’s recommended defensive riding strategy SEE, which stands for Search, Evaluate, and Execute. A rider must search ahead for potential hazards, evaluate the nature and level of risk, and execute a controlled response to avoid the hazards. This involves visual and perceptual functions, cognitive and attention capabilities, and motor skill responses. Let’s examine the three functions of SEE with concern for how aging may affect our ability to perform them.

Search primarily involves our vision. As we get older, visual clarity diminishes. This is gradual and typically begins between the ages of 40 and 50. Night vision is especially diminished. On average, an older person requires four times more light than a younger person. Eyes become more sensitive to light, making it difficult to adjust to glare or oncoming headlights. Eyes take longer to adjust to the dark. Eyes take longer to adjust between near and far objects. Depth perception diminishes. Peripheral vision diminishes. Street and directional signs are more difficult to read. The prudent rider gets regular eye exams and corrective lens as needed, and has appropriate eyewear for glare. He/she may also want to limit riding at night.

The ability to hear traffic and related sounds is also important for safe riding. For the approximately 30 percent of those over age 60 who are hearing impaired, a device to improve hearing may be warranted.

The evaluation phase of SEE involves riders interpreting what they see. This cognitive process can be slowed by aging. Space and distance may be misjudged. Awareness of impending risk and the reaction to it may be slowed, resulting in delayed response time. It is important to maintain focus and alertness as you ride. Look far enough ahead to allow sufficient time and space for evaluation of what you see and for accurate judgments and appropriate reactions. Older riders are also more susceptible to confusion from complicated signage or multiple stimuli, especially in unfamiliar areas. There may be more going on in traffic than the rider perceives. More time may be required to process the information. Older riders may benefit from riding mostly in familiar areas or in less congested areas and following another rider rather than being the pathfinder.

Execution, i.e., taking appropriate action to avoid hazards, involves motor skills. Muscle tone and strength deteriorate as a rider ages. Without weight training or equivalent physical activity, a person loses 6-10 percent muscle mass per decade starting about age 30. Endurance is diminished. Reaction time slows. Reacting to a hazard may take twice as long for a middle age rider (40-54 years of age) and up to three or four times longer after age 55 or so. Control sensitivity lessens. The feeling of the road through the tires and handlebars lessens, as well as the feedback that occurs in cornering and braking. This may have serious implications in crash avoidance maneuvers. Motorcycle crashes generally result from a confluence of multiple contributing factors. Aging may reduce the number of simultaneous risk factors that a rider may be able to respond to safely.

Assess yourself. The effects of aging occur gradually over time and deterioration may not be readily noticed. We check our bikes before riding. We should also check ourselves and realistically assess our readiness to ride.

Aging affects each of us differently, and it's not all negative. In general, bikers are active people and may be less susceptible to some aging effects than inactive people. Seasoned riders are experienced riders and have had the time to develop good riding skills and good defensive riding ability. Age can bring mature judgment, making a rider more appreciative of riding safely and less prone to risk-taking. Bikers are motivated to keep riding and will make adjustments as they age to be able to keep riding.

Many concerns can be addressed by improving riding skills. Take a refresher course periodically and practice skills under controlled conditions. Emphasize defensive riding, especially honing your ability to anticipate. A regular regimen to improve physical fitness, strength, and dexterity has overall health benefits in addition to you feeling more fit on your bike. Attend to vision concerns and any other relevant health issues. Wear protective gear. If you are no longer confident in your physical ability to handle your current bike, it might be time to consider getting a different one. Safety is improved by a bike that fits the rider well and is of a size and design to enhance his/her comfort and control.

Ride conservatively and increase your safety margin. Riding at the limit of your skill level may work when conditions are as expected. However, the road is full of surprises. Instead, consider riding *within* your skill level and reserve some speed, traction, space, etc. for when the road presents something unexpected and challenging.

It is wise for us to be aware of the effects of getting older. As these things affect us personally, we should make the effort to correct or compensate for them.

The road still beckons. The subtitle of the *Seasoned Rider Module* is "Motorcycling for the best years of your life." Let's ride safely and enjoy them.

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August 2013