Sharing the Road with Bicyclists

What does sharing the road mean?

When driving, motorists must be aware that other types of travelers use the roadways, including bicyclists. Many people are bicycling now to save money on fuel costs, to combine exercise with the trip to work, for basic transportation, and for recreation. Bicycling provides mobility and independence at a low cost while improving physical fitness and reducing traffic congestion and air pollution.

Sharing the road with bicyclists means following the same rules and regulations around bicyclists as around other vehicles, and more. Bicyclists have an equal right to the roads and can be found in virtually any type of traffic situation or roadway, except where they are expressly prohibited (locations such as interstates, expressways, on/off ramps). Bicyclists do, however, have qualities that set them apart from motor vehicles that drivers should understand.

Bicyclists:

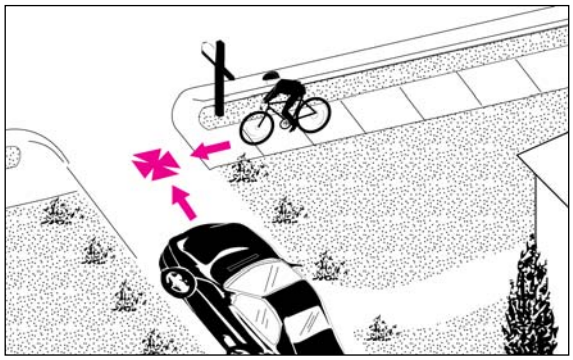
- **May be harder to see than cars and trucks, especially in low-light conditions.** Bicycles are simply smaller than most other vehicles, so learn to look for them. Children on bikes and recumbent style bicycles may have an even lower profile than other bikes.
- **May travel more slowly than motor vehicles in some situations, but as fast or faster in others.**
  Climbing hills and on rural, higher-speed roads, bicyclists may be slower than motor vehicles. In slower city traffic or on downhill stretches, bicycle speeds may exceed those of other vehicles if they have space to ride.
- **Are almost always approaching faster than pedestrians.**
- **Are at risk of crashes and falls due to debris, potholes, pavement cracks, skids, and sudden stops that would not cause problems for vehicles with more than two wheels.**
- **Should follow traffic rules and regulations for vehicles** and any additional laws that pertain to bicyclists when operating on public roadways, *but,*
- **Are not required to be licensed as are motor vehicle drivers,** *and,*
- **Include child riders and others who may not always understand or follow the rules of the road or behave predictably.**

Drivers of motorized vehicles, therefore, have a greater responsibility to *slow down, expect the unexpected, drive courteously, and ensure the safety of bicyclists riding in their vicinity*. A bicyclist has little protection and may be seriously hurt if struck by a vehicle or caused to crash in attempts to avoid colliding with a vehicle.

Driving Near Bicyclists

Drivers should obey all traffic laws to prevent collisions, but a few rules of the road and precautions are especially important to follow with respect to bicyclists. The most common types of collisions can be prevented if you do the following:

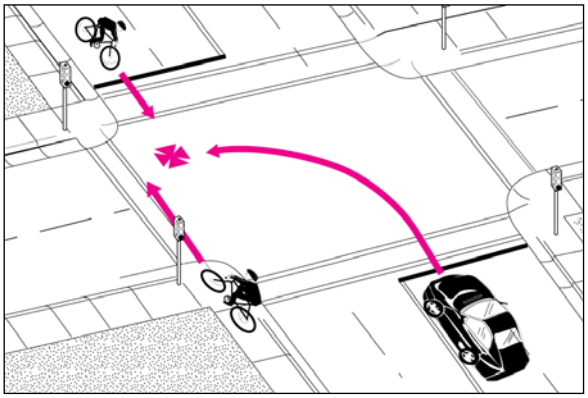
Entering the roadway – When entering the street from a driveway or alley, always look in both directions for bicycle (or pedestrian traffic) before pulling across a path, the sidewalk, or onto the street. Bicyclists might be riding on sidewalks or paths as well as the roadway and approaching from either direction, and are typically traveling much faster than pedestrians.



Look both ways for bicycle and other traffic before pulling out of driveways.

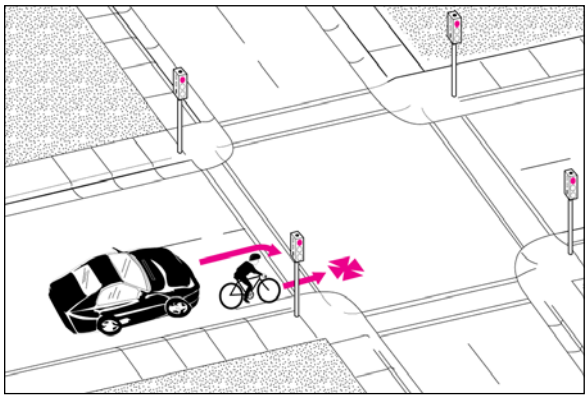
At intersections (including with paths) – Observe right-of-way rules with bicyclists, and make eye contact to ensure a safe interaction. Bicyclists may have difficulty clearing an intersection before signal changes, so always *check in all directions* before starting into a signalized intersection. At stop-controlled intersections, stop at stop lines or *before* the crosswalk area and *check for bicycle and foot traffic from the left and the right* before driving forward and into the intersection. Be on the lookout for bicyclists, including children, who may ride into the intersection from an unexpected direction or from a sidewalk.

Making left turns – Always look for and yield to oncoming bicyclists when making left turns at intersections or driveways. Bicyclists may be traveling faster than you think and cannot slow or stop suddenly to avoid you. Be sure to check over your left shoulder for bicyclists that might ride off the sidewalk into your path.



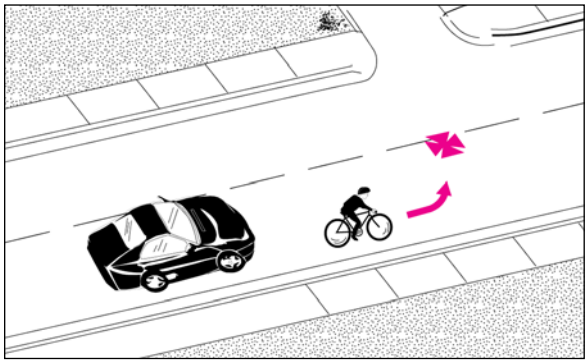
Yield to bicyclists when making left turns.

Making right turns – Bicyclists traveling straight have the right-of-way (right to proceed first) over vehicles turning or merging right across their path. Do not pass bicycles, usually traveling along the right side of the roadway, and then make a quick right turn in front of them. Before merging or turning right, check to the right and over your right shoulder for approaching bicycles, signal your intentions, and merge or turn when it is safe to do so. Make sure you are aware of the speed of any approaching bicyclists. Also look for bicyclists approaching on the sidewalk or adjacent path before making any turn.



Yield to bicycles before turning right.

Passing bicyclists – When overtaking a bicycle, slow down and wait for a safe opportunity to pass, just as you would when following a slower motor vehicle. Allow at least 3 feet of side clearance between your vehicle and the bicycle's handlebars. Watch for hand signals, shoulder checks, or other evidence such as weaving, that may indicate the bicyclist needs to merge or turn left.



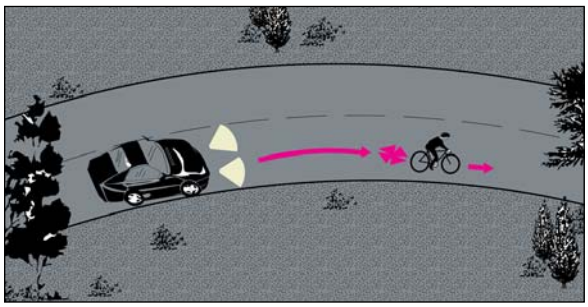
Do not pass a bicyclist that is trying to merge or turn left.

Bicyclists also often have to avoid hazards along the edge of the roadway and may swerve suddenly into your path, so allow plenty of space. If there are large mirrors or other projections on your vehicle, allow extra clearance. Check over your right shoulder before moving back right, and again, give the bicyclist plenty of room considering the bicyclist's speed and position. If using your horn to alert a bicyclist to your presence, use caution and a light touch *before* you begin your pass. Don't honk your horn loudly during your passing maneuver as it may startle them and cause them to swerve into your path.

Overtaking bicyclists (or other motorists) is often most challenging on rural roadways or other narrow, winding roads where sight distance may be poor and lanes are narrow. Be patient, and wait for a safe opportunity to pass; the small amount of extra time that might be needed can save a life.

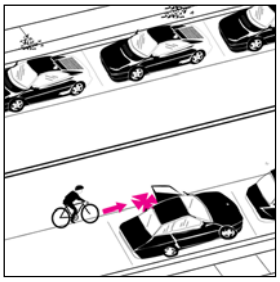
In a narrow lane, even if the bicyclist is riding far to the right, wait for proper passing conditions before pulling into the adjacent lane. In two-way traffic, wait for a legal passing zone, sufficient sight distance, and a sufficient gap in opposing traffic to pass safely. Check for on-coming bicyclists or pedestrians in addition to other traffic before driving on the opposite side. When there is more than one lane in the same direction, be sure to check over your shoulder for other passing cars, and signal before changing lanes.

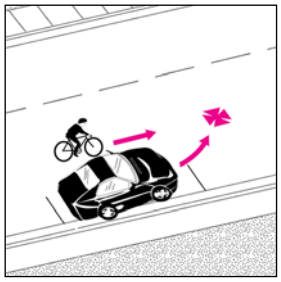
In a wide lane, still provide plenty of space for the bicyclist. If the lane is wide enough to allow passing in the same lane (at least 3 feet lateral clearance), observe that the bicyclist is riding predictably and straight, and has a clear path ahead, before passing cautiously.



At night be extra alert for bicyclists. A majority of passing-related collisions that result when the motorist does not see the bicyclist occur at night.

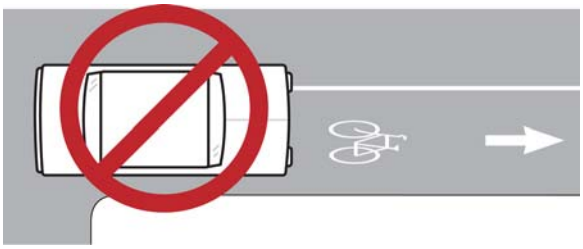
Parking – When parallel parked along a city street, exit the vehicle on the curb side if possible. If exiting on the side next to travel lanes, check behind for approaching bicycles and other traffic before opening your car door.





Finally, when leaving your parking space, be sure to check over your shoulder before pulling back into traffic.

Avoid driving in bike lanes – Bike lanes are specially striped and marked facilities for the use of bicyclists only. They allow space for bicyclists to ride outside of the regular traffic lane. Motorists should have no need to drive in bicycle lanes, unless making a right turn.



(Bike lanes are usually on the right side of any through lanes, but to the left of right turn lanes.) As always, be sure to check behind for bicyclists, and yield to any riders approaching before merging into a bike lane or other bicyclist path to make your turn.

Allow bicyclists to merge for left turns – Bicyclists, just like motor vehicles, will need to merge left to make left turns. Be considerate and give them space to merge and don't follow too closely. Watch for left-turning bicyclists ahead and never pass a left-turning bicyclist or motorist on the left.

A few other tips for safely sharing the road with bicycles:

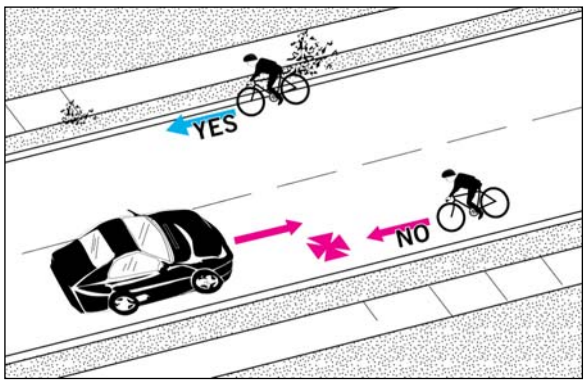
- Bicyclists are more difficult to notice than larger vehicles. Add bicycles to the list of things to watch for when scanning the roadway.
- Take extra precautions on neighborhood streets and around child bicyclists or those riding erratically who may veer into your path without warning. Pay attention to those riding on sidewalks as well.
- Give bicyclists extra space and care on poorly maintained roadways or where debris or other objects may cause them to swerve suddenly.
- Never allow a bicyclist to hold on to, or be pulled by, your vehicle.

How do bicyclists share the road?

Obey all traffic laws. The same laws that apply to motorists apply to bicyclists, and motorists are more likely to respect bicyclists when they obey the laws and ride predictably.

Entering the roadway – Always stop and check both ways for traffic before entering the roadway.

Riding with traffic – Ride in the direction of traffic in the farthest right lane that is going in your direction. Do not ride too close to the edge and always look ahead for hazards. Riding against traffic is against the law and puts you in a location where motorists don't expect you, decreases reaction time, and increases risk of collisions. Avoid riding in motorists' blind spots, especially of large vehicles.



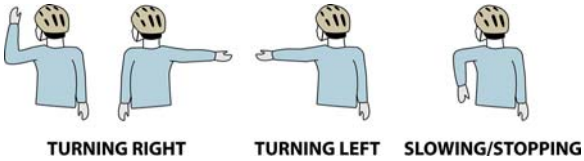
Do not ride on the left, facing traffic, as it puts you at increased risk of a serious collision.

Taking the lane – Ride further to the left or take the lane when:

- The lane is narrow in order to discourage drivers from passing you too closely.
- You are riding close to the same speed as other traffic.
- There is debris or other hazards, such as broken pavement or poorly designed drainage grates, near the right edge.

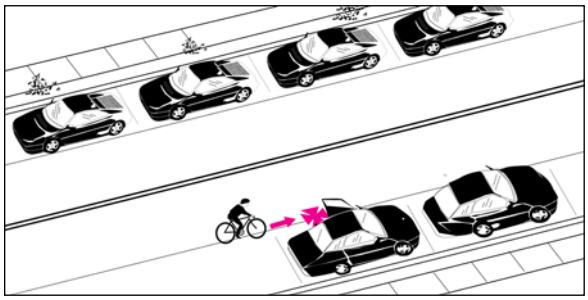
Negotiating intersections – Obey signs, signals, and markings. Stop for red lights and stop signs and observe right-of-way rules. You will be more likely to get a signal change if you stop at correct locations – look for loop detectors in the pavement or markings that indicate bicyclist position. Do not pass motorists on the right near intersections unless you have a lane going in your direction; even then, extreme caution is warranted, especially with large trucks or buses. Motorists won't be expecting you on their right and you may be in a blind spot. Making eye contact with motorists can help ensure safe interactions.

Turning, merging, slowing – Plan ahead for turns. Scan behind for traffic and signal your intentions before merging left or right or making a turn. Hand signals are required to indicate left and right turns, slowing and stopping. Signaling your intentions to motorists helps them to anticipate and give you the space you need.



Use proper hand signals when bicycling.

Riding next to parking – If there is on-street parking, ride at least 3 feet away from parked cars (the door zone) and watch out for car doors opening, or cars backing or merging into traffic. Ride in a straight line and don't swerve in and out between parked cars.



Avoid the door zone when riding next to parked cars.

Riding at night – The law requires that bicyclists have proper front (white) and rear (red) lighting. Lights increase your visibility to motorists and pedestrians who will have great difficulty seeing you in time to avoid collisions if you don't use adequate lighting. Lights may also help with your own view of the road ahead, but you should adjust your speed according to your ability to see. Side reflectors and reflective clothing and other gear such as ankle and arm bands can further increase your visibility to others.

Riding on sidewalks or adjacent paths – It may be legal in some communities to ride on sidewalks in certain locations, but requires additional caution. Again, motorists may not expect you or look for bicyclists on the sidewalk, and sight lines may be poor, so when riding on the sidewalk or paths adjacent to roadways, behave like a pedestrian – travel slowly, and check for turning and exiting traffic before crossing driveways, alleys, and intersections. You may not be able to easily see signs and signals at intersections, so be cautious, and follow right-of-way rules for pedestrians traveling in your direction and position.

A few other tips for bicyclists to safely share the road:

Riding at night, alcohol use, and not wearing a safety helmet are all associated with higher fatalities for bicyclists.

- **Ride sober –** Just as you should never operate a motor vehicle under the influence of alcohol or other drugs, never operate a bicycle under the influence of these substances.
- **Be conspicuous –** Ride predictably and follow rules of the road to be most conspicuous. Ride in a straight path in the same direction as other traffic, and don't switch back and forth from sidewalk to street. During the day, wear bright, fluorescent colors to be seen easily by motorists. Again, at night or low light times of day, use proper front and rear lighting, reflectors and reflective clothing and gear.
- **Use a helmet –** Wear an approved, properly fitted safety helmet, no matter how short the trip or whether local laws or ordinances require helmet use. A majority of head injuries can be prevented by proper helmet use in the event you're involved in a bike-only crash or a crash with a motor vehicle. Ask for advice on fitting and correctly wearing a helmet when you purchase a helmet or from trained bicycle safety experts.
- **Maintain your bike –** Use a bicycle that fits you and is in good mechanical condition. Learn to do a quick check of tires and air pressure, seat, brakes and cables, the crank shaft, chain, and gears, quick releases, and for any loose parts before every ride.
- **Avoid stunt riding –** To be safe, save play or stunt-riding for off-road, designated locations such as bicycle parks. Stunt riding interferes with safe riding practices, may reduce attention for other vehicles, persons or objects, and increase risk of a collision. Do not carry extra passengers on a bicycle unless they have a proper seat.
- **Transport children properly –** Young children being carried on a bike should ride in an approved child bicycle seat or trailer and wear a properly fitted safety helmet. Children too young to sit up by themselves should not be transported on a bicycle.