

## Staying safe on two wheels means taking precautions

By Natalie McGill

**A** bicycle can be an alternative to driving to work, a way to stay active or quick transportation to a friend's house. But whether you're an experienced rider or a novice, practicing riding safety ensures

you'll make it to your destination in one piece.

Your bike equipment and what you wear — from your head to your feet — can help prevent serious injuries and possibly death.

To prevent injury, you should do a series of safety checks before you even hoist yourself on your bicycle. Riders should first check out their bicycle's vital signs, such as the tire air pressure, bicycle chain and the brake system, says Laura Sandt, MRP, associate director of the Pedestrian and Bicycle Information Center at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill's Highway Safety Research Center.

When it comes to bicycle riding, your gear plays as big a role in safety as your riding skills.

Sandt says she recommends that bicyclists stay well lit. Many states have requirements to have a light on the front of the bicycle and a reflector on the rear at the minimum, she says.



>> For more information on bicycle safety, visit [www.nhtsa.gov/bicycles](http://www.nhtsa.gov/bicycles)

Sandt recommends a blinking light in addition to a rear reflector to make a bicyclist more visible. But visible clothing is also important.

"A lot of bikers choose to wear reflective gear on their body," Sandt says. "We've seen studies that show if you put a reflective material on your body, like a leg, it catches the attention of drivers better than something stationary, like the back of your seat, for example."

A few extra items should be packed away before you start your ride. Remember to always carry an ID so that in the event of a crash anyone who helps you get medical attention knows who you are and how to contact your family and friends, Sandt says.

Extra cargo to consider on longer trips include snacks, sunscreen and a rain poncho.



There are also different rules you'll need to follow depending on what path your bicycle travels to keep yourself and others safe.

Courtesy is key when it comes to riding paths without vehicle traffic, such as designated trails. Chances are, you'll be sharing that trail with walkers, joggers and people on roller blades, Sandt says.

"Slowing your speed around other users can be a sign of courtesy," Sandt says. "Either using your bell or your horn or calling out before you pass somebody can help them to know when you're coming up from behind."

Paying attention to signage that tells you to slow down or keep to a certain direction is also important, Sandt says. Bicyclists should also use caution on trails that intersect with traffic.

If you bike in a city, remember that many state laws say your two wheels are considered vehicles like the cars you might be sharing the road with, Sandt says.

Cyclists are expected to follow traffic signals and signage just like cars alongside them. Some cities may not allow you to ride on a sidewalk, which can be just as unsafe if filled with pedestrians and drive-ways where vehicles back up into traffic, she says.

While on city streets and bike lanes, cyclists

need to remember to use hand signals to let motorists and cyclists around them know where they're going, she says.

"One of the things we tell bicyclists is to be particularly vigilant when moving through intersections," Sandt says. "Crash data really show us that most of the bike collisions are happening at intersections and driveways, when the motorist is turning."

Some behaviors, such as listening to headphones, should be off limits whether you're on a trail or in a city street, Sandt says. Cyclists depend on their hearing and sight to notice signs of danger, such as cars coming from behind, Sandt says.

"If you have headphones in, you're blocking one of the key senses you need to avoid a crash," Sandt says.

After your ride, remember to drink water and eat food to replace the energy you burned.



Images courtesy iStockphoto: Bike accessories, Lok Fung; couple, Mike Bowden.

### Wearing a helmet is essential

Your helmet is a key piece of your biking safety, Sandt says. Wearing a helmet regularly during your bicycle rides lowers your risk of brain injury by 88 percent and risk for head injury by 85 percent, according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration.

Your helmet must be positioned on top of your head so it protects your forehead and not tipped back, Sandt says.

Having a well-fitted helmet means you can't fit more than two fingers between your eyebrows and the top of your helmet. You also shouldn't be able to fit more than two fingers between your chin and your chinstrap, she says.

"You want your strap to be fairly tight so that your helmet doesn't come off in case of impact," Sandt says.

