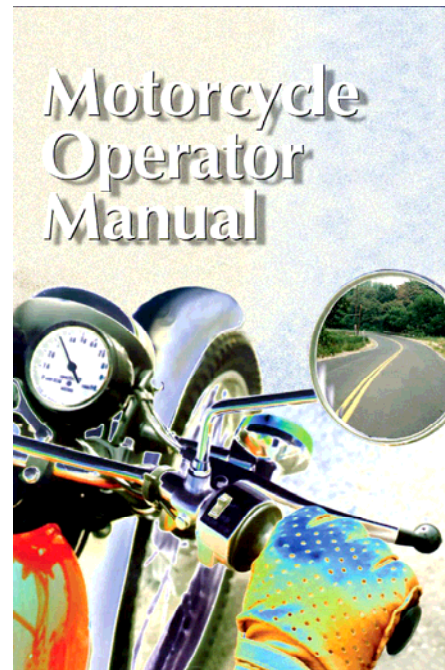


Motorcycle Safety: A Growing Concern

There are over 4 million motorcycles registered in the United States. The attraction of motorcycles as a reliable mode of travel are many: low initial cost, its use as a recreational vehicle, and with rising fuel prices, low operational costs, to name a few. However, unlike motor vehicles, motorcycles present a number many safety concerns just by the nature of the machine. One of the main reasons motorcyclists are killed in crashes is because motorcycles themselves provided virtually no protection in a crash. For example, approximately 80 percent of reported motorcycle crashes result in injury or death; a comparable figure for automobiles is about 20 percent. What a motorcycle sacrifices in occupant protection, weight, bulk, and other crashworthiness characteristics is somewhat offset by its agility, maneuverability, ability to stop quickly, and ability to swerve quickly when necessary.

Research conducted on motorcycle safety in Michigan is following a disturbing national trend; death and injury are on the rise. From 1997-2002, fatal motor vehicle crashes in Michigan fell overall by 8%, but the motorcycle fatality rate rose by 27%. Additionally, just over half of those operating a motorcycle who were involved in a crash had a valid motorcycle endorsement on their drivers' license. The majority of crash-involved motorcyclists without a drivers' license at all were age 18 years and younger, although the percentage of them dropped from 69% in 1997 to 54% in 2002. By not obtaining a motorcycle operator license, riders are bypassing the only method they and state licensing agencies have to ensure they have the knowledge and skill needed to safely and skillfully operate a motorcycle.



The peak months of motorcycle crashes in Michigan were June, July, and August. The peak days were Saturdays followed by Sundays. The peak hours were between 3:00 P.M. and 6:00 P.M.

Most motorcycle crashes occurred on dry roads, in good weather, and in daylight. Approximately 75% of motorcycle crashes involving an operator who had been drinking alcohol occurred between 6:00 P.M. and 3:00. The majority of motorcycle crashes from 1997 through 2002, occurred on dry roads, in good weather, and during the day. Per vehicle mile, motorcyclists are about 32 times as likely as passenger car occupants to die in a traffic crash and about 6 times as likely to be injured. (NHTSA Traffic Safety Facts, 2003)

Head injury is the leading cause of death in motorcycle crashes. (U.S. Department of Transportation/National Highway Traffic Safety Administration, State Legislative Fact Sheet). In 1969, the year Michigan enacted a mandatory helmet law, there were 145 motorcycle fatalities, in 2003 there were 76 motorcycle fatalities. (Michigan Traffic Crash Facts)

It is obvious that there is no simple fix to help address the situation. There are a number of suggestions however, some provided by the Michigan Office of Highway Safety Planning, that if put into practice, could make for positive changes.

Some of these include:

- Attend a motorcycle rider-training course to learn how to safely and skillfully operate a motorcycle.
- Motorcycle training programs, motorcycle dealerships, and insurance companies could be recruited to help address the licensing problem.
- Motorcycle dealerships could help by insuring that their customers do not drive off without proof of a valid motorcycle license.
- Insurance companies could also help by requiring proof that their clients are licensed to operate a motorcycle when selling them motorcycle insurance.
- Ensure that motorcyclists have the appropriate skills for their motorcycles
- Conduct a public education campaign educating motorists about the differences between the operating characteristics of cars and motorcycles, and the safe ways to drive near motorcycles. Driving schools and driver education programs in schools could also include a lesson on how to drive near motorcycles.

With the leading cause of death in motorcycle crashes resulting from head injuries, assure the helmets being used are DOT-approved as required by law. Motorcycle helmets are 70 percent effective in preventing brain injuries. Motorcyclists not wearing a helmet and involved in crashes were more than three times more likely to suffer injuries than those wearing helmets. (NHTSA, Traffic Safety Facts, 2004) . Not only does an approved helmet provide vital protection for the brain, they can improve the rider's ability to hear by streamlining the head and ear which can reduce wind noise allowing the rider to hear other sounds. They also prevent eye injuries and distraction from dust, dirt and debris thrown up by other vehicles on the road.

A motorcyclist has to be more careful and aware at intersections, where most motorcycle-vehicle collisions occur. Motorcyclists should not be in a car's blind spot. Anticipation of other drivers actions can be lifesaving. For example, anticipate that drivers backing their cars out of driveways may not see you; and place greater emphasis on defensive driving. Motorcyclists must use more caution when riding in inclement weather, on slippery surfaces, or when encountering obstacles on the roadway. They must place greater reliance on their helmet, eye protection and clothing to increase riding comfort and to reduce the severity of injury should they become involved in a crash. Because a motorcycle requires more skill and coordination to operate than a car, operating under the influence of any amount of alcohol significantly decreases the ability to operate the motorcycle safely. Always use appropriate gear. For more information on motorcycle safety please log onto www.michigan.gov/sos.