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To prevent more bicycle fatalities

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Bicycle safety rules misunderstood by nearly all involved

The tragic fatality last on Monday put bicycle safety back in the spotlight here.

Bicycling is a viable form of transportation with current gas prices. However, there are a lot of misperceptions about how to ride safely. It is not intuitive and cyclists and motorists must be educated to improve bicycle safety. There are many details on cycling safety that need to be covered; here are some fundamental principles.

Understanding crash statistics is essential to bicycle safety. The most common fear is that a car will hit a bicyclist from behind. The reality is that half of bicycle crashes are falling off the bicycle. Less than 20 percent involve motor vehicles.

In fact, collisions with pedestrians, animals and other bicycles are twice as likely as motor vehicle collisions. Only about 5 percent of bicycle crashes with motor vehicles involve the cyclist getting hit from behind. Over 85 percent involve crossing traffic. Either the bicycle pulls in front of the car or the car pulls in front of the bicycle.

Since any crash can result in serious injury or death, bicycle safety must focus on reducing these risks.

The concept that reduces crash risk the most is called vehicular cycling. John Forester, author of "Effective Cycling," says it best: "Bicyclists fare best when they ACT and are TREATED as drivers of vehicles."

Alabama law reflects this principle and grants cyclists the same rights and responsibilities as any motor vehicle drive on the roadway.

The reason why cycling in the road with traffic reduces the crash risk is that is where motorists expect high-speed traffic. Bicycles easily reach 25 mph on level ground and go even faster on steep descents. Segregating bicycles from motor vehicle traffic makes cyclists less visible to motorists and thus increases the crash risks.

Alabama law defines the cyclist's position as "as far right as practicable." This causes considerable confusion. This does not mean "as far right as possible."

"Practicable" means what is safe and reasonable and may be the left hand portion of the left most lane. The right one third of the right most lane is a good starting point but may change further left or right depending on the circumstances.

Since most roads are not wide enough for a cyclist and motorist to share the lane, cyclists should use the full lane. Most cyclists want to get out of the way of traffic, but in this case moving further into traffic reduces the crash risk.

Most bicycle crashes with motorists traveling the same direction do not involve getting hit from behind, but hit from the side by the right rear quarter panel. Cyclists that are too far right invite motorists to try to "squeeze by" when there is insufficient room.

Cyclists using the full lane reduce this risk by making motorists pass them as they would pass any

other vehicle - in the next lane. If traffic is backed up, a courteous cyclist will pull completely off the road and stop while motorists go by. Once the road is clear, the cyclist can continue. Motorists should not expect cyclists to move as far right as possible while still moving.

Many motorists feel that bicycles should be on sidewalks or bike paths. Sidewalks increase the risk of a collision with a motorist two to four times because motorists are not looking for high-speed traffic where they cross the road. Sidewalks are not considered usable for cycling except for young children.

Bike paths increase the risk 2.6 times, but this can reach 1,000 times depending on the design. Even greenways that do not intersect roads have higher crash risks due to collisions with pedestrians, animals and other bicycles.

Shoulders can be a viable facility for cyclists depending on the design. Shoulders with too many intersections, where the shoulder turns into a right-turn-only lane or on steep descents should not be used. Bike lanes are a shoulder with additional paint. They suffer the same risks as shoulders at intersections since cyclists are not where motorists are looking.

Motorists also do not know how to turn right across bike lanes and cyclists do not know how to turn left from a bike lane, both increasing crash risks. Debris is a significant issue with bike lanes and shoulders because it is not swept away. It can cause a fall, the most common crash type.

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