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Pedal Your Way to Safety

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In February 2012, a Soldier riding his bike was struck from behind by a privately owned vehicle in Olympia, Wash. The Soldier died after being removed from life support, and the driver was charged with the accident.

Another Soldier on a bike was struck by a privately owned vehicle on a blind curve near Augusta, Ga., in February 2011. The Soldier suffered extensive injuries and was placed in a medically induced coma before he died.

While the deaths of these two Soldiers demonstrate the hazards facing those who enjoy biking for fun or exercise, the overall safety record for cyclists is getting better.

The League of American Bicyclists and America Bikes report the loss of 618 lives in bicycle/motor vehicle crashes in the United States in 2009, lower than the 830 fatalities in 1995. Injuries are also on the decline, falling from 61,000 in 1995 to 51,000 in 2010.

The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration's "Seven Smart Routes to Bicycle Safety for Adults" provides common-sense safety tips Soldiers, Family members and Civilians can use to ensure their bike rides are memorable for all the right reasons.

For starters, all riders should wear a helmet. According to NHTSA, a properly fitted helmet is 85 to 88 percent effective in preventing traumatic brain injury, the primary cause of death and disabling injury resulting from cycling crashes. Helmets should meet the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission standard, verified by a label inside the helmet.

Bikes should fit their riders too. There should be one to two inches of clearance between the rider and tube (bar) for standard bikes. That number goes up to five inches for mountain bikes. Seat height matters too — the seat should be adjusted so the rider's leg has a slight bend at the bottom of his or her pedal stroke, when the leg is fully extended.

Brakes are high on the safety list for obvious reasons. Signs brakes need adjusting include increased stopping time, uneven or separated brake pads, and brake levers that touch the handlebars when depressed. All brake work should be performed by a qualified technician.

Just like cars and trucks, bicycles are considered vehicles on the road and must follow the same traffic laws that apply to motorized transportation. Always ride with traffic and obey traffic signals, signs, speed limits and lane markings. A good resource for bicyclists is their state's driver licensing handbook.

According to NHTSA, cyclists should signal in advance of turns, yield to pedestrians and other vehicles, remain watchful for other wheeled traffic and avoid using headphones while riding. Bicyclists should also be predictable and courteous to other drivers, make every attempt to see and be seen at all times, and always remember they're sharing the road.

Finally, riders should be aware of special rules on military installations. Army Regulation 385-10, The Army Safety Program, requires that bicyclists wear a reflective upper outer garment and equip their bikes with operable headlights and taillights when riding on Department of Defense installations during periods of darkness or reduced visibility.

Bicyclists vary in age and skills, but safety applies to everyone. For more information on bicycle safety, visit www.nhtsa.dot.gov or <https://safety.army.mil>.

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