

ROADCRAFTY

STAYIN ALIVE!

Wet Weather Riding.

So – You’re thinking about riding a bike in the rain then – well you must be considering it or you wouldn’t be reading this article. The fact of the matter is, if you live and ride in the UK, you’re going to get wet at some point so now might be a good time to pick up some tips.

The following pages contain advice on how to make the whole process of wet weather riding a lot safer and, believe it or not, much more enjoyable so get yourself a coffee, sit down and read on.

In reality, it is the fear of what ‘might’ happen that is the biggest problem. By applying some well-known basic principles and having faith in the ability of the machine and its tyres, wet weather riding needn’t be nearly as daunting as many people think. Another thing to consider is that learning to ride well in the wet will also help to improve dry riding skills.

The three main things to remember are:-

1. Relax.
2. Be smooth.
3. Look where you want to go.

There’s nothing new there, and that is because the principles behind safe wet weather riding are exactly the same as riding on dry roads. These three main elements will apply consistently to all aspects of safe motorcycle control, in any conditions. The main difference when riding on a wet road surface is that any lack of smoothness is more likely to bring about an adverse reaction from the machine resulting in a twitch, slide or even a complete loss of control.

A fuller explanation of these three main points will follow but to start with, it is helpful to have an understanding of what the tyres have been designed to do in the wet and how we, as riders, can help the tyres to do their job.

Think of the tread on your tyres as a water pump. As the tread area comes into contact with the road it is designed to deform and push (pump) water to the side. In a bend, the water is usually pumped to the outside and away from the path of the rear tyre. Because motorcycle tyres are relatively narrow and have a small contact patch they don’t have to push the water so far (as a car tyre), this is why the minimum tread depth is less than that for cars. It is also the reason why motorcycles are less likely than a car to suffer the effects of aquaplaning (floating on a cushion of water) – but it can still happen if there is a combination of too much water and too much speed. Also, please forgive the obvious – the less tread there is left on the tyre, the less effective the ‘pump’ will be, so tread depth will be an influencing factor in the ability of the tyres to find grip.

A very important point to remember is that the tread will be less effective if the tyre isn’t subjected to some of the deformation mentioned earlier. If the machine is coasted into a corner, with no throttle applied, the tread will struggle to work. By subjecting the tyre to a sensible amount of cornering force and acceleration (light throttle) the required deformation will take place thereby allowing the tread to do what it has been designed to do.

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Let's start by relaxing.

A common mistake that many riders have is to tense up and sit rigidly on the bike and to grip the handlebars tightly. The result will be that any rider inputs become less subtle, any slight twitches will be amplified and it becomes more and more of an ordeal. If the rider is relaxed, any little slides that occur will usually sort themselves out without drama and it will often feel that those little 'slides' have actually taken place behind the bike, not under it.

Sit naturally (not bolt upright). The hands should rest on, but not grip, the handlebars. The arms, back and shoulders should be relaxed and supple to allow the rider to make the best use of feedback from his or her control surfaces (hands, feet and seat). Wear suitable riding kit that will keep you dry and warm but not so bulky or heavy that wearing it becomes a challenge of its own. Good quality riding kit needn't be prohibitively expensive but you should always aim for the best you can afford. Remember to tuck your gloves into the sleeves of your coat- it stops rainwater from running down and filling your gloves. If you are warm and dry it will be easier to relax. If you are relaxed, you will be much more likely to feel what is happening, you will be more comfortable and, you won't get nearly as tired.

Keep your visor clean and, if it has started to collect scratches, it is time to look for a replacement. Use a pinlock system or an anti-fogging spray to reduce the amount of misting that can take place to make sure you can see properly. Sounds pretty basic but it can make a big difference to your safety.

Next – It's smoothness.

As you already know, a motorcycle is at its most stable when travelling in a straight line and light throttle is being applied. The difficulties start when we need to corner, speed up or slow down. Any change in speed or direction will need some input from the rider and it is these inputs that must be smooth. Clearly, there is less available grip on a wet road surface but the chances of a loss of traction or skid will be increased significantly if the rider carries out any sudden changes in speed or direction.

Select an appropriate gear for the speed and learn to use the throttle judiciously so that the machine settles down and keeps trying to go in the direction you want it to.

Finally - remember to look where you want to go .(sound familiar?).

One of the biggest problems riders have is our old enemy, 'target fixation'. Human beings are 'hard wired' to stare at anything which is perceived to be a threat. In the wet, with a heightened sense of nervousness, this is even more likely to happen. Whether it's a slippery drain cover, a vehicle moving towards us, or even a small patch of mud in the road – if it frightens us, we will stare at it because that is what nature intended. It follows that if you stare at something, (a hazard), that is exactly what you'll ride towards.

It is important to scan the near and middle distance so as to factor any hazards into our riding plan and to plot a safe course but - look for the furthest point you can see and that is where you'll go – so will the bike.

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Cornering – Relax - Be smooth - Look where you're going.

Follow the basic principles. If you start by relaxing on the machine, follow this by keeping it smooth and remembering to focus on where you want the machine to go, the whole process will become safer and easier. Confidence will improve and this will bring about the 'knock on' effect of helping you to relax further and making the whole process much less of a challenge.

If the initial turn in is attempted while the brakes are still being applied, it is quite possible that the front tyre can be overwhelmed by the combination of forces acting on it. Learn to read bends and to judge a suitable, safe speed. Get the braking done before turning in, get the right gear and use gentle throttle to press the rear tyre into the road as you see the limit point moving away.

A machine that is being ridden into a bend with the throttle shut off will wallow and be unbalanced. This will only serve to make the rider even more nervous.

As mentioned previously, the tyres need to be subjected to some forces in order for them to work properly. By smoothly applying light throttle and generating some cornering forces, the tyres will be pressed more firmly against the road surface and do what they've been designed to do.

Use all round observation to help decide on an appropriate speed and get the braking done before entering the bend. Take in information that can be used to decide on the correct line. Scan the near and middle distance for any hazards that might influence the choice of line or speed but look to the limit point of vision and use it to help you. The main focus of visual attention should always be the furthest point you can see to be clear. If the machine cannot be stopped safely, on the correct side of the road before reaching that point – slow down. The accelerator should be rolled on gently to help the bike settle and remain stable. Have confidence in the ability of the bike, its suspension and its tyres to keep you moving in the direction you want to go.

Try to turn in smoothly and avoid any sudden changes in direction that might unsettle the bike. Remember – Relax, Be smooth and, Look to where you want the bike to go.

Braking.

If you need to reduce speed squeeze the brake lever gently but firmly (much like squeezing a tennis ball) to allow the front tyre to work. This is true at any time but becomes even more important in the wet. Learn the capabilities of the braking system in a safe location. The front brake can be applied quite quickly and squeezed quite firmly to great effect but the mistake often made is to 'grab' the lever. If the front brake is snatched at, the likely result will be that the tyre locks up before the suspension has had a chance to compress and push the tyre against the road surface. The important part is to apply the brake smoothly. This will compress the front suspension and press the front tyre against the road surface thereby making the tyre grip, as it's been designed to do.

If the brakes are applied hard enough on a dry surface the tyres will give off a tearing sound, if it's wet the noise will be suppressed and, if the surface is smooth and shiny, there will be very little noise at all. So-

Relax - there is little to be gained from gripping the handlebars tightly under braking and, apart from using the knees to brace against the sides of the tank, the rest of the body should be relaxed to give the rider a feel for what is happening.

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Be smooth – Once again, don't grab at or stamp on the controls. The front brake should always be applied first. This will start the front tyre working for you and will allow you to judge the amount of rear brake you need to slow down effectively. If the rear brake is applied first it is quite likely that it will lock up as soon as the front brake is used as the weight transfer forward will make the rear end light.

On a dry road, the majority of braking should be done at the front wheel. On a wet surface it is better to use both front and rear by equal amounts but remember – front brake first to get the bike settled.

It is not a good idea to wait for an emergency to happen before finding out what the brakes can, or can't, do. Find a suitable, safe location to carry out as many practice runs as possible. Ensure that there are no vehicles coming up behind you and gradually increase your road speed and learn to apply the brakes smoothly and firmly to bring the machine to a safe controlled stop. If the rear brake locks up, learn to recognise it happening and release brake pressure to allow the tyre to grip again. It will improve the chances of dealing successfully with a panic lock up when it's not expected.

It is only by learning the capabilities of the brakes and tyres that the rider can develop the confidence needed to improve the safety margin in the wet.

ACCELERATING

Remember that modern motorcycles tend to have plenty of spare horsepower – this asset needs to be used with some thought. If the accelerator is wound open suddenly, the results can be quite severe.

Roll the accelerator on smoothly, in the right gear, to make the rear of the machine settle and allow the tyres to work. A common error is to select a higher gear to reduce the immediate effect of opening the throttle. The danger with this approach is that so many modern bikes have reserves of power that can cause the rear wheel to start spinning quite suddenly. The engine will catch up quickly and can quite rapidly cause the wheel to spin up to an uncontrollable speed which will probably be followed by the back end moving sideways. If the spinning continues you may well lose control completely and the bike will slide away from under you. If the tyre suddenly finds some grip the likely effect will be a 'high-side' which will almost certainly separate rider from machine.

Road Surfaces.

Motorcycles are obviously more sensitive to variations in road surface conditions and this is where good observation can help. Scan the surface and try to plot a route that allows you to avoid any surface that offers less grip.

The centre section of your carriageway (the bit that the vehicle tyres miss) will often be much less worn and can offer more grip but beware of the fact that this is also the area upon which debris and leaked engine oil / diesel can gather. Lorries, even modern ones, leak oil and diesel occasionally and this will seriously affect grip when wet. Scan the road surface and look for the clues you need to help you decide on the safest place to be.

Anything that is painted on the road surface (white lines, arrows etc), cats eyes and manhole or drain covers will offer little in the way of grip either so should be avoided. If you have no choice but to ride over these surfaces always do so with the machine upright. If such a surface is

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encountered mid corner then try to avoid it but, failing that, try to get the bike as upright as possible when riding over the offending surface before tipping back into the turn.

If possible, avoid riding through puddles – there is no way of knowing how deep they are or what hazards might be lying in wait beneath the water.

Finally – don't put off riding in the wet. As stated earlier, the chances of getting caught in the rain are quite high so the sooner that wet riding skills are acquired, the better.