

STAN'S SAFETY TIPS

The older I get, the faster I was. Can anyone relate to that? Even for those who can no longer see their 50th birthday in their rear view mirror and have ridden pretty much continually since they were in their 20's, as aging progresses, there's the need to remember that your "guardian angel" is aging as well. Its wings are getting just a little frayed for some of us. Then there are others, who have raised their family, have a successful career and possibly are even starting to contemplate retirement. It's been years since they were on a motorcycle but the mystique that was there in the distant past now begins to come out of the shadows every time they see a motorcycle. Or maybe they never took the time or the chance to throw a leg over a bike and imagine what it would be like ... but the thought is starting to overtake them ... they really want to ride a motorcycle. The "guardian angel" for these folks had better hold on tight and start working out on the treadmill.

As the years rapidly progress, it's easy to think that possibly your life has become too routine ... too safe. Skydiving ... hang gliding ... rock climbing ... all may be a little over the top so to speak. But motorcycling is seen by much of the population as a risky activity and can be a very attractive solution to the search for some excitement.

The performance of today's motorcycles is far advanced compared to what might be remembered from 25 years ago. Engine displacement larger; so much power at the slightest twist of the wrist. You can go fast ... make rapid turns ... lean way over ... what only racers may have been doing not that many years ago. The latest technology is very seductive and can make you think you are as capable as the machine is.

Choose the scenario ... riding forever, re-entry or late- bloomer ... what is the impact of aging as a motorcyclist? According to statistics, older drivers have more traffic convictions and accidents per mile than any other age group and are more often cited as being at fault in an accident. This very possibly translates over to aging motorcyclists. What happens as we age?

Slower reaction time is a BIG one. When tested and evaluated on a closed course, such things as speed estimation ability, road positioning, maneuvering skills, merging behavior seem to become less adequate as we age. There can be subtle, yet critical, changes to our hearing. Decreases in both peripheral awareness and cognitive processing speed can occur. Our eyes possess such a weird sense of humor. The lens of the eye become yellow and less transparent with age while the pupils become smaller and less able to dilate in dim light. A loss of, or decrease in, vision depth perception can occur. When looking at what could be called a "cluttered" picture ahead

of you when riding ... basically SO much to see and filter, it can be more difficult to focus in on a target item ... such as a red light when it activates. Factors in early cataracts can mean increased total driving times ... peripheral reaction times ... maneuvering times. And unfortunately, try as we may to stave it off, our bodies become more fragile. Aging motorcyclists will suffer more serious injuries and will take longer to recover. Take a 700 lb motorcycle, at a stop ... simply falling over with that machine when you're 25 compared to at age 50 is likely to produce different body reactions the next morning.

In the U.S. in 2004, motorcycle fatalities increased more than 7% over 2003. The 7th straight year this statistic increased. An astounding overall 85% increase since 1997. The majority of the increase in motorcycle deaths, 60%, involved riders over 40-years old. In the 18 years from 1985 to 2003, the median age of all motorcyclists rose from 27 to 41. As the motorcycle license holder population ages, the age of those involved in fatality or injury crashes will likely also increase.

Things that make you wonder about life ... Take the slowed reaction time mentioned earlier and factor in that age makes us tire more easily; then couple that with the idea that older riders are more likely to choose longer social rides that can cover hundreds of miles in a day ... riding from dawn to dusk. Our "sharp edge" is starting to wear off just a little (or maybe a lot) by the end of the ride.

Overall, motorcycling doesn't get sufficient attention by safety research so understandably it's not totally clear why the increase in casualties for aging riders. Inexperience is one factor and a convenient explanation for that would be the large number of baby boomers (and older) beginning to ride or returning after a long absence. This is possibly a good part of it. When discussing the accident fatality trends and older riders, one NHTSA (National Highway Traffic & Safety Admin) representative stated that it suggests we need to focus on training for those returning to or just getting into motorcycling at an older age. Another possibility is over-confidence. Older and presumably wiser riders seems to be taking more risks, not factoring' in that age card and all it carries with it. Are you routinely taking medicine you weren't 5 years ago (or maybe even last week)? One really significant statistic indicates that older riders are more likely to drink alcohol before riding. Cold hard fact: nearly half of all motorcycle fatalities involved riders who had been drinking. The effects of alcohol on a 2-wheel rider are potentially more severe than on a 4-wheel driver, something that should be pretty sobering. There's also complacency ... "Been riding since I was old enough to climb on a motorcycle and nothing's happened to me." Being involved in motorcycle safety as we are, we see training as a life long commitment. Never let yourself believe there's nothing more to learn. Whether it's a formal class or an event put on by a club or organization to brush up for the new riding season, get involved ... take the challenge. It'll be fun and you will probably benefit. When Elaine & I ride our personal motorcycles, we are practicing what we teach and continually attempt to improve as riders. Especially with the aging process, it's increasingly more important to keep your skills sharp.

Stay safe and enjoy the ride!

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