

# Sharing the Road

## A Guide to Safe Bicycling in California



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# Sharing the Road: A Guide to Safe Bicycling in California

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are about 11,000  
bicycle collisions a  
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result in injuries or  
fatalities.**

Bicycling is a great option for shorter trips and a way to spend time outdoors being physically active. It's eco-friendly, healthy, and fun. Bicycling can also be challenging and carries similar responsibilities as driving a car. For both, you need to understand the basic rules of the road.

Good drivers should make good bicyclists because they already understand basic road rules. Conversely, good bicyclists should make good drivers because they understand the importance of sharing the road.

The Auto Club offers this guide to help you and your loved ones stay safe on the road. Safe bicycling involves much more than just wearing a helmet. Riders and motorists can take several steps to make bicycling safer and more enjoyable.

# Equipment

## Bike Helmets

A properly fitted helmet is the most effective action a bicyclist can take in minimizing the likelihood of brain injuries and deaths from collisions. Helmet use can help prevent 85 percent of all head and brain injuries when worn correctly.

Even though 70% of all fatal bicycle crashes involve head injuries, only 20 to 25 percent of all bicyclists wear bicycle helmets.



It's the law in California that everyone under age 18 must wear a helmet while bicycling, but the reality is everyone is better protected with one on. Violators may be fined up to \$25. Make sure your helmet fits well and has the Consumer Product Safety Commission seal of approval.

### ***Auto Club's Helmet Fitting Tips***

- 1. Correct Size**  
Helmet must cover the forehead and be worn no more than an inch above the eyebrows.
- 2. Adjust Pads**  
Adjust foam pads inside the helmet for a snug fit.
- 3. Adjust Straps**  
Ear straps should form a "V" just below each ear.
- 4. Test Fit**  
Straps should only move one inch when the helmet is rocked.



## Handlebars, Frames & Brakes

Making sure the brakes work and bicycle fits you is required by law. This means that bicycle *handlebars* can't rise above the shoulders and obstruct the view. Bicycle *frames* should fit so bicyclists can stop, support and restart their bikes with ease.

Oversized bike frames that are too big for riders make stopping, supporting and restarting difficult. Bicyclists should be able to stand over the frame with both feet flat on the ground.

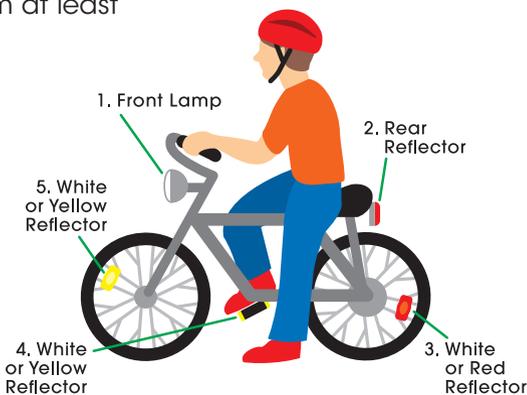
California law requires a functioning *brake* on all bicycles. Being able to slow and stop the bike with good working brakes is probably the most important function for safe riding. Coaster “pedal backward” brakes must be able to lock the rear wheel on level ground. When pressed fully, hand brake levers should not touch (“bottom out”) on the handlebar.

## Bicycling after Dark

There are about 11,000 bicycle collisions a year in California that result in injuries or fatalities, many due to a lack of visibility.

It is the law that bicyclists must use headlights and reflectors when riding at night. Smart cyclists also wear light colored or retro-reflectorized clothing, and use blinking lights. Other night-time bicycle equipment required by California law includes:

1. **Front lamp emitting white light**  
that can be seen from at least 300 feet away
2. **Red rear reflector**  
that can be seen from 500 feet away
3. **White or red reflectors**  
mounted on both sides of the wheel at the back
4. **White or yellow reflectors**  
on each pedal, shoe or ankle visible from 200 feet away
5. **White or yellow reflectors** mounted on both sides of the wheel at the front



At night, watch out for motorists, joggers, walkers, wrong-way cyclists, and small animals. Also keep your eyes open for potholes, loose gravel, and even trash that will be hard to see at night.

# Traffic Laws

Bicyclists should follow the same basic traffic laws as drivers of motor vehicles, observing traffic signs and signals (stop, yield, etc.), looking and yielding at intersections and when changing lanes. *Most crashes happen at intersections.*

## Hand Signals is the Law

Most drivers and other bicyclists are unaware where bicyclists plan to go unless they let them know by use of hand signals while riding. Hand signals, like turn signals on cars, help others anticipate a bicyclist's intended movements and reduce the chance of collisions.



### Left Turn:

Left hand and arm extended horizontally beyond the side of the bicycle.



### Right Turn:

Right hand and arm extended horizontally to the right-hand side of the bicycle **OR** left arm extended upward and hand raised, as shown above.



### Stop or Sudden Decrease in Speed:

Left hand and arm extended downward beyond the side of the bicycle.

## Ride with Traffic on the Right Side of the Road

Riding against the flow of traffic may seem safe but it's actually illegal and more dangerous! Riding with the flow of traffic is the best way for bicyclists and motorists to share the road.

Where a bike lane is available, California law requires a bicyclist to use it if traveling slower than the speed of traffic.

When possible, pass to the left when trying to get by slower moving vehicles and bicycle traffic. That way, there is less risk of getting caught in a driver's blind spot and getting hit.

Where a bike lane is *not* available, California law requires bicyclists to ride *as close as practicable to the right-hand curb or edge of the road*.

Exceptions to the Rule: A bicyclist can leave the bike lane or ride further to the left: (1) to pass another bike or car, (2) make a left turn, (3) avoid something dangerous, such as debris or opening car doors, (4) at a place where a right turn is allowed, or (5) when a travel lane is too narrow to share side by side between a vehicle and a bicycle.

Try to stay *at least* 3 feet away from parked cars when possible to avoid hitting a suddenly opened car door.

Always scan behind and over your shoulder, signal, and yield as needed before changing position in or across lanes. Only move over when it is safe and courteous to do so.



## Approaching Intersections

Riding through busy intersections can be challenging if you lack experience bicycling in traffic. When approaching an intersection, always look around for lane markings, traffic controls and what other motorists, pedestrians and bicyclists are doing.

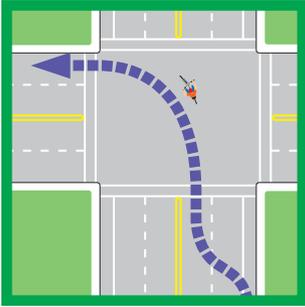


# Intersections and Sharing the Road

## Right Turns

When making a right turn, the basic requirements for bicyclists are the same as the rules motorists must follow at stop signs or legal turn on red at traffic lights.

Yield to traffic approaching from the left, including pedestrians. Signal right turns by pointing with your right arm as previously noted.



## Left Turns

Observe traffic by looking around and changing lanes with caution. Show a hand signal to make sure drivers know a left-turn is about to occur and always try to make eye contact with nearby drivers.

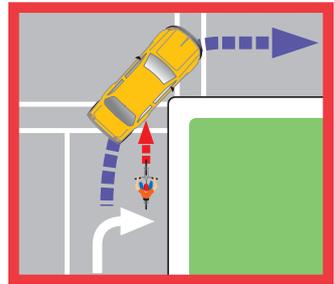
When there is a left-turn lane, move the bicycle to the center or the right side of the left turn lane. Avoid allowing

vehicles to pass on the right side while making a left. Ride the bicycle in the center of the left-most lane as if driving a car where no left turn lane is available.

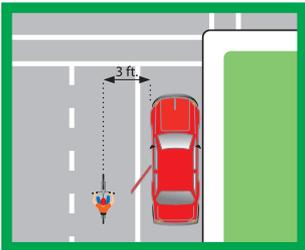
Walking across the intersection as a pedestrian is always a good option for children and bicyclists who feel uncomfortable with their skill level to make left turns with moving traffic. Remember to stop, dismount and walk within the crosswalk as a pedestrian.

## Straight Through

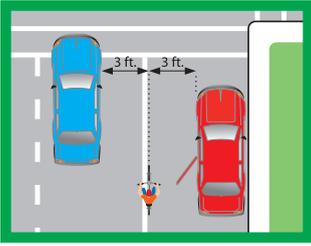
Bicyclists should stay out of right turn only lanes when their intent is to ride straight through an inter-



section. Riding through intersections from right-turn only lanes puts bicyclists at risk of getting hit by cars.



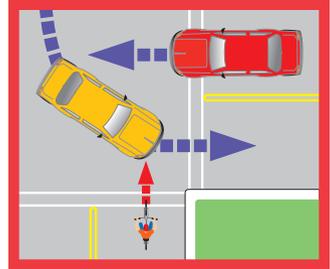
In narrow lanes where there is not sufficient room for both bicyclists and vehicles, ride in the center of the right-



most lane and try to stay at least three feet away from parked cars.

In wide lanes where there is at least 3 feet clearance on each side of the bicyclist to ride side by side with vehicles, ride to the right of the traffic line. Motorists should be able to safely pass with plenty of clearance.

Bicyclists should be visible to vehicles turning left from the opposite direction or driving straight through from their right. Avoid riding on sidewalks or passing vehicles in intersections as these actions limit the ability of motorists to see bicyclists. Slow down to make eye contact with oncoming traffic if necessary.



### ***Other Ways to Cross***

Children and less experienced bicyclists may find it difficult to merge with traffic at busy intersections. These riders should cross as pedestrians by dismounting and walking their bikes within the crosswalk markings.

## **Riding on Freeway Shoulders & Sidewalks**

Only experienced bicyclists should ride on freeway or highway shoulders where allowed by law and there is no alternate route. Bicyclists are prohibited from riding on the majority of freeway shoulders in urban areas. Look for signs that indicate which freeways are prohibited to bicyclists.

Bicyclists should stay off sidewalks and ride on the road with traffic. Those who ride on sidewalks pose a risk to pedestrians. If you're new to riding or simply uncomfortable riding on busy streets, use routes with easier traffic conditions while learning to ride.

### ***Caution!***

Most cities prohibit bicycling on sidewalks; check your local laws.

# Distracted and Impaired Riding

Alcohol is a contributing factor in 1 out of 4 crashes involving bicycle-related fatalities.

## Riding while Drunk is Illegal

Never operate a vehicle with wheels—motorized or otherwise—after drinking or taking drugs. Drunk bicyclists can be fined up to \$250. Cyclists under 21 and over 13 years of age could lose their driver license or have its approval delayed for up to a year as a result of cycling while intoxicated.

## Distracted Riding

It's illegal—whether driving a car or riding a bike—to cover both ears with headsets or earplugs (except for hearing aids). Bicyclists are allowed to cover one ear, but make sure sirens and horns can be heard to indicate when an emergency vehicle is approaching. Listening to music too loudly, talking on the phone or sending text messages while riding reduces alertness and response rate in traffic. Distracted riding endangers everyone.

## Young Bicyclists

Not surprisingly, kids under 15 ride bikes four times more often than most adults. Bicycle safety tips need to fit the age and skill level of individual riders, and the situations in which they will be riding.

### Helmets & Other Safety Gear

Never let a child ride without a CPSC-approved helmet and provide plenty of praise when they put one on. Small children and



new riders should also consider wearing other safety equipment, such as retro-reflective clothing, knee and elbow pads.

## **Basic Skills**

Young bicyclists still learning basic skills should only ride with experienced cyclists, ride with caution and preferably on streets with slower traffic. Children should be trained to look both ways and yield to cross traffic before leaving a driveway or when entering a roadway from a corner or a crosswalk.

## **Teaching Kids under Age 8 to Ride**

Adults should carefully assess bicycle riding capabilities for kids less than 8 years old. Parents should determine if their kids are ready to ride under careful supervision on neighborhood streets. Here are some other tips for kids:

- Practice in a safe place away from moving vehicles, such as an empty parking lot, school playground, or vacant lot.
- Young children, who are not comfortable with riding in traffic, should dismount and walk their bikes across intersections.
- Kids need to know to look both ways and to yield before entering streets.
- Parents should be confident of their child's abilities when deciding to let kids ride without supervision.

## **Passengers under Age 4**

California law states that kids less than 4 years of age or 40 pounds have to be strapped into bike seats and wear a bike helmet. If a kid's neck cannot support a helmet while sitting upright, the child should be in a specially designed trailer or bike designed to carry infants.

### ***Top Ten Basic Skills for Bicyclists***

1. Mounting
2. Starting
3. Balancing
4. Riding in a straight line
5. Looking
6. Signaling
7. Turning
8. Slowing down
9. Stopping/braking
10. Dismounting

# Share The Road...

## FOR BICYCLISTS

- California law requires helmets for riders under age 18, but it is recommended ALL bicyclists wear one.
- Regardless of riding experience, always choose bicycling routes carefully.
- Follow the same rules of the road as other road users, including riding in the same direction as traffic and following all the same traffic signs and signals.
- Ride on the roadway or shared pathway. Give pedestrians the right-of-way when in close contact.
- Maintain a straight line; ride predictably; and avoid swerving between parked cars.
- When riding with others, ride single file to allow motorists to pass you safely.
- Ride your bicycle as far right as practicable.
- Use hand signals to indicate stops, turns, and changes of direction.



- As you approach intersections, be aware of cars behind, beside, and in front of you who may try to cross your path.
- Pay attention to parked cars. Drivers may pull out in front of you or open a door in your path.
- When riding at dusk or after dark, use appropriate lights and reflective gear.
- Keep your bicycle in good working condition.

# Share The Road...

## FOR MOTORISTS

- Stay alert: avoid distractions while driving.
- Slow down when encountering bicyclists or pedestrians.
- Give bicyclists extra room—three feet if possible—when passing them on the roadway.
- When making a left turn, be aware of the possible presence and speed of oncoming bicyclists.
- When parked on the side of a street, look for passing bicyclists before opening your car door.
- Watch for cyclists and pedestrians before exiting a parking space or driveway.
- Avoid using your car horn near bicyclists or pedestrians—it could cause them to swerve into traffic or off the roadway and crash.
- Don't expect kids on bikes and pedestrians to know traffic laws or to behave predictably.



This guide is intended to provide information for safe bicycling in California, including the value of using proper equipment, bicycle maintenance and the rules of the road. The Auto Club provides a broad array of community resources and traffic safety information. Please email us at [RoadAhead@aaa-calif.com](mailto:RoadAhead@aaa-calif.com) or call (800) 541-5552 for more information about safe bicycling or other traffic safety resources.

*This safety guide was prepared with assistance from state and local bicycle organizations, including the League of American Bicyclists, California Department of Transportation, San Diego County Bicycle Coalition, Orange County Bicycle Coalition, and the Los Angeles County Bicycle Coalition.*



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