

Now that the weather is starting to heat up, it is appropriate to discuss riding gear. The March Safety article presented “Three Degrees of Separation” for motorcycle riders; a mental strategy, riding skills and protective clothing. Last month, we discussed SEE as a mental strategy, this month we will cover protective gear with a focus on keeping cool during hot weather. Many riders tend to shed their protective clothing during hot weather. This is really a bad idea. Wearing protective riding gear is just as important in the heat of summer as it is in cooler weather. Riding gear has two basic purposes: comfort and protection. The essential components are:

Headgear

In Georgia, we are required to wear helmets, so a detailed discussion of their merits is not necessary. However, you should know that, per mile traveled, the number of deaths on motorcycles is about 16 times greater than the number in passenger cars. The Hurt Study found the use of the safety helmet the single most critical factor in reducing head injuries. Helmets save lives.

Clothing

Leather clothing is a favorite with motorcyclists because it’s durable, wind resistant and gives good protection against cold and injury. The next most durable fabrics are corduroy and denim. Mesh riding jackets have become popular in recent years. They provide good abrasion protection (most have body armor) and are great for hot weather riding. While protecting the body, the mesh lets air pass through providing the opportunity for body cooling. Regardless of temperature, you should always wear a long sleeve shirt or lightweight jacket. You can burn before you know it. Also, the wind will dry out your skin and could cause dehydration. Wearing a light colored, long sleeved shirt will not make you any hotter than riding in a tee shirt. On hot, sunny days, it is best to wear light colored clothes and helmet. Lighter colors reflect the sun’s rays, rather than absorbing them like darker colors. This can make a difference of 10 degrees or more on hot days.

Gloves

Leather gloves that fit snugly improve your grip on the handlebars and protect your hands from sun and wind. In the heat, sweaty hands or fingers may slip off the controls. Gloves offer a buffer against this. They also provide some level of protection against flying objects, such as rocks picked up by traffic or insects that may collide with your hands. If you fall, full-fingered gloves will minimize cuts and bruises to your hands. Seamless gloves will help prevent blisters.

Footwear

Over-the-ankle leather boots will help protect your ankles from flying road debris, burns from hot exhaust pipes, and foot injury in case you spill. Buy boots with oil-resistant, rubber-based composite soles to give you a strong grip on the pavement and help keep your feet on the pegs.

Beware of dangling shoelaces, the loops can get caught on foot controls and prevent you from being able to put your foot down when you stop. Tie shoelaces securely and tuck the loops and loose ends into your boots or shoes.

Keeping Cool

Riding when the temperature exceeds 90 degrees can be dangerous to your health. Unless you take care to keep your body temperature under control even rides as short as an hour can result in heat-prostration or even sun-stroke. If you keep your neck cool, because the large blood vessels that feed your brain are so close to the surface, you greatly diminish these health risks. A popular device that is simple and effective in this regard is called a 'cool collar' and is made from a tube of bandanna material that contains some water absorbing beads sewed into it. The beads increase in size about 50 TIMES over when they are dry. Water will evaporate from the collar over a several hour period. Any evaporation activity cools - but only marginally so from the wearer's point of view. That is, within half an hour of putting one of these collars around your neck, even if it had been in a cooler before you put it on, the collar will be very nearly at the temperature of the air around it. Thus, you usually find that people that use them have two - one of which is always sitting in an ice-chest. You can also soak the shirt in water and it will act as a natural air conditioner – when it dries out it's time to stop and soak it in water again.

Wind, sun, hours on the road—it's easy to dehydrate. Dehydration can be very serious but it is preventable. Signs are less frequent urination (urine passed will be less in volume and darker in colour), fatigue, headache, dizziness and cramps. Don't wait until you're thirsty and have a headache to drink. Chug down water or fruit drinks whenever you get the chance. Avoid caffeinated soft drinks, coffee, or tea—they're diuretics that can actually contribute to dehydration.

Portions of this article were taken from the American Motorcycle Association (AMA), "Safe Rider's Guide" by SAFECO Insurance Company of America, "Safe Riding" by Allstate Insurance Company, and "Tips & Techniques" by James R. Davis of the Master Strategy Group.