

Road Hazards!

There are many road hazards out there, just waiting to ensnare the unaware rider. Last month we discussed evasive maneuvers when a hazard suddenly appears in our path. But there are a number of other hazards encountered in everyday riding that we seldom hear about. Although most of these do not present problems for 4-wheelers, they can be very dangerous for the motorcyclist.

Crosswalks and other painted lines - These can be extremely slick when wet. Even when dry, painted lines often provide less traction than normal asphalt.

Railway tracks - These can catch your front wheel and dump your bike. Pay attention to the angle tracks cross the road. Use as much of the road as necessary to get a safe attack angle. Some crossings have metal or wood instead of asphalt between the two tracks which can be very slick when wet.

Grated Steel Bridges - Most of these steel bridges were constructed back in the 1940's and were new technology at the time. The decking is made up of vertical steel bars that are spaced an inch apart and vehicle tires tend to follow the grooves between the bars. These grooves will cause the bike to track with an uncomfortable weave. This isn't a problem but if the rider over reacts it can become one. So relax and let the bike track the grooves. Also note that the tops of the steel bars become polished slippery smooth from traffic and traction becomes marginal, especially when wet.

Manhole Covers - Another common trap for the motorcyclist, but one that is much easier to avoid. Most manhole covers are made of steel, which can get worn smooth by traffic and become very slippery. Worse still, if the manhole cover is higher or lower than the surface of the road, it can cause you to lose control of your bike.

Tar Snakes - The standard repair method for pavement cracks is to fill them with tar as a sealer. As the temperature rises in the summer, the road expands and squeezes the tar back out of the cracks making a gooey mess. Part of the problem is that the tar is slippery when hit by a bike tire, particularly where a repair crew has been extra liberal with the amount of repair material. If you hit one of these snakes, your bike tires will become coated with the tar and will have a reduced coefficient of friction for several miles past the site.

Sealer Coatings - One of the standard "fixes" for old roads that are breaking-up, is to seal the top with a coating of road tar and spread loose gravel over the top. Sometimes we see these repairs in one lane or it may be for an entire stretch of road. The loose gravel over the top of the soft tar can be dangerous for any vehicle. So if you find one of these areas, approach it with caution.

Oils, Lubricants and Other Chemicals - There are a lot of automotive fluids that get dribbled over the road surface, including motor oils, transmission fluid, anti-freeze, diesel fuel, gasoline and several others. You can spot these surface hazards by knowing where

to look. Intersections and tollbooths collect layers of residue from idling vehicles. On- and off-ramps have more than their share of fluids, including diesel fuel from overfilled trucks. Diesel fuel has a distinct odor, which can warn you about its presence. You can also look for clues, such as the rainbow sheen or beading water on the road surface. If you must cross these hazards, slow down before the hazard, then ease off the brakes and keep your wheels perpendicular to the ground.

Rain after a long dry spell - Contaminants that saturate a road surface during dry weather make a pretty good lubricant during or following a light rain. Be especially smooth when braking, turning or accelerating during this time, or better yet, sit out the beginning of a storm. It takes about one-half hour of hard rain to wash the surface clean.

Standing water - If you need to go through standing water, slow down. There may be a pot hole under the surface which could cause you to lose control or you may begin to hydroplane if your tires cannot displace the water fast enough. Hydroplaning will make the bike feel like it's on ice. If you are unlucky enough to experience this make no steering inputs and ride straight on through.

Gravel on pavement - This can be deadly. Gravel is more common as the road becomes twistier. It seems cars have a hard time staying on the pavement when there are corners. Gravel problems tend to be worse in spring due to winter rains. A little bit of gravel should be avoidable (or you are riding too fast). Unavoidable gravel covering the entire corner can be taken in stride if there is plenty of asphalt showing and you are prepared to let the bike slide around a bit. The key is to relax, don't over-react and keep steering towards the exit line. Bikes are surprisingly stable and will usually ride it out.

Sand Traps - Sand tends to gather towards the side of the road, especially on curves, where we as cyclists are most vulnerable. Heavy rains tend to wash away the sand in the spring, but it also can wash dirt and clay into the roadway, which can create some interesting problems. Sand doesn't change its character much when it is wet, but dirt and clay can create an outstanding lubricant when combined with water and set upon by a rubber tire.

Rubber Octopuses - These are big, jagged pieces of tread rubber that have come off of truck and trailer tires and lay along the highway. If you run over one, it can "grab" your tire and attempt to go along for the ride. The problem is that it usually gets jammed between the front tire and front fender and brings the front wheel to a quick and sudden stop, causing the bike to crash. So, don't even think about bouncing over a piece of loose rubber in the road. Even a small chunk can grab your front tire.

Wheel or Edge Traps - An edge trap is any raised pavement edge or groove running parallel to the lane direction. For instance, when a lane is repaved, the edge of the new paving is raised several inches higher than the old paving. That raised edge can be out in the traffic lane. If you allow your front tire to ease up to a raised edge, it's very likely you will lose control and go down. It is called an "edge trap" because it tends to capture your front tire and trap you into a fall. Once your tire is trapped by the raised edge, it's almost

impossible to avoid a spill. Crossing an edge trap can be tricky. If the surface is only 1" high you can ride over it without much concern so long as you approach it at an angle of at least 20 degrees. Anything higher than about 1" and you must put as great an angle of attack to it as possible. Ideally you want to cross over it with a 90 degree (perpendicular) angle.

These are some of the many hazards out there in the roadway just waiting for your arrival. Learn to recognize them and to take the appropriate action to insure your safety. There are too many statistics already in the record books on motorcycles and we do not want to become one of them. Ride safe!

Portions of this article were taken from *Proficient Motorcycling* by David L. Hough, Road Hazards at Motorvike.com, Rain Dance by Ken Cordon from *Motorcycle Consumer News*, Pitfalls of Riding by Victor Montgomery and Motorcycle Tips and Techniques by James Davis.