

Driving Safely with Vulnerable Road Users in Mind

Vulnerable road users

Each year thousands of vulnerable road users are injured or killed because they are hit by car or truck drivers who didn't see them. "Vulnerable road user" is the term applied to those most at risk in traffic. Vulnerable road users are mainly those unprotected by an outside shield, namely pedestrians, bicyclists and motorcyclists. Children, the elderly and disabled people are considered especially vulnerable groups of people since they have physical disadvantages compared to an average road user.

In a collision with a car or truck vulnerable road users are at higher risk of fatal or severe injury compared to the "protected" driver and occupants of the motorized vehicle. In collisions with other road users they suffer the most severe consequences because their level of personal protection compared to persons in a vehicle is very low. They have a high risk of injury in any collision with a vehicle.

The majority of vulnerable road user fatalities happen in urban areas, where there are more complex intersections. There are simply more pedestrians and bicyclists in these areas. Urban areas often have heavy traffic and complex conditions where motorcyclists are more often hidden and drivers are not attuned to expecting a motorcyclist. In these conditions drivers are likely focused on traffic signals and other vehicles and may not notice vulnerable road users.

While collisions with vulnerable road users can happen any time, collisions with a pedestrian often happen in low light conditions and bicyclist collisions are often in full dark conditions. Collisions with motorcyclists usually occur during daylight times, clear weather conditions and dry roads.

Pedestrians – what drivers need to know

People that are walking, running, jogging, hiking, skating or skateboarding are considered pedestrians. Pedestrians are often found in urban areas such as shopping plazas, gas stations, malls and neighborhoods. Since pedestrians are slower than cars and have no protection against a collision, it is hazardous for them to be walking in any place where cars and other vehicles travel.

The movement of pedestrians is often not straightforward travel from one place to another. They do window shopping, carry bags, push carts or walk a dog which might make their movements unpredictable. When people are walking to work they usually choose the shortest route and do not want to spend any extra time on the trip. They obey the rules when they think it is sensible and necessary but taking the shortest route can mean they do not use designated pedestrian crossings. They may not obey pedestrian crossing lights if waiting for the light seems to take too long. Pedestrians on familiar routes tend to pay less attention to traffic than when walking in unknown surroundings.

Children often misjudge the speed and intentions of drivers. They are easily distracted and may

dash into the road without looking. Older people may have difficulties in seeing or hearing approaching traffic and may have decreased mobility. Nearly half of all pedestrians killed are over 60 years of age.

How you can help pedestrians

- Give them time and room to cross, especially the elderly or disabled.
- Remember, they may be hard to see, especially children
- Be ready for the unexpected
- Don't park on sidewalks
- Stop at marked pedestrian crossings if someone is waiting to cross
- You must stop for School Crossing Patrols
- Never wave a pedestrian across the road – there may be other traffic overtaking from behind
- Slow down. Your speed can literally make the difference between life and death

Bicyclists – what drivers need to know

Bicyclists are found on the roadways or in bicycle lanes but they can be difficult to see, especially at intersections. A bike lane can be identified by an image of a bicycle painted on the bike lane or a sign next to the lane. Bicycles are considered vehicles so they belong on the road when there isn't a bike lane. In most states they are required to follow the rules of the road. You can find bicyclists on many roads; however, you shouldn't find them on interstates.

Bicyclists have a difficult position in traffic. They sometimes are supposed to follow rules for motorists and sometimes rules like those intended for pedestrians. There is indeed a great deal of variation in bicyclists' behavior in traffic.

Young bicyclists may not be able to deal with all the traffic signs and rules that apply to them. They may play and show off which leads to risk taking. Young bicyclists have a tendency to wobble and are easily affected by side wind when being passed.

There is also some amount of recklessness among adult bicyclists, especially at intersections with traffic signals, where bicyclists may decide on their own about crossing rather than wait for the light to change. Bicyclists may ride out away from the curb to avoid drains and debris and to be more easily seen. After a stop, they cannot start off very quickly.

Elderly bicyclists' capability to cope with the traffic situation while concentrating on riding decreases with age; they tend to react more slowly. Compared to other age groups older bicyclists more often have difficulty steering the bicycle. Other than that their patterns of behavior do not significantly differ from those of younger cyclists, except they usually ride slower.

How you can help bicyclists

- Think bicycle. Expect to see bicyclists and give them time and room
- Always check your mirrors for bicyclists
- Be especially careful that your right-side is clear when turning right.
- Never pass a bicyclist and then turn right shortly afterwards
- Give bicyclists plenty of room when passing. Three to five feet is often a legal requirement
- Respect bicycle lanes
- Slow down. Your speed can literally make the difference between life and death

Motorcyclists – what drivers need to know

Just like pedestrians and bicyclists, motorcyclists have no significant protection to help them survive a collision. Responsible riders wear protective gear, take actions to make themselves and their machine conspicuous and utilize defensive driving techniques but in a collision with a car or truck the motorcycle rider is at significant risk of serious injury. Different from pedestrians (and sometimes bicyclists), motorcyclists travel directly on the roadway and are required to follow the exact same traffic rules that car drivers are required to follow.

Motorcycles are small and not as common as other vehicles. This means that drivers aren't used to seeing them. After a collision with a motorcyclist drivers often report not seeing the motorcycle and rider or not seeing them until too late to avoid the crash.

The small size of the rider and her/his motorcycle makes it easy for them to get lost in the traffic mix. A driver's ability to see a motorcyclist can be easily blocked by the car window/door pillar or by roadside obstacles like signs, poles or trees.

The small size of the motorcycle and rider also makes the motorcyclist look farther away than she/he really is. This makes it difficult to judge the motorcyclist's speed. And, unfortunately, motorcycle riders, more often than car drivers, are traveling faster than the posted speed limit.

Drivers must be especially careful when preparing to turn left across an oncoming traffic lane. This is a scenario where drivers most often violate the motorcyclists' right-of-way and the consequences are often catastrophic. The driver doesn't see the motorcyclist and turns directly in front of the rider leaving the rider no time to avoid the collision.

Motorcyclists often slow by downshifting or merely rolling off the throttle, thus not activating the brake light. At intersections, anticipate that a motorcyclist may slow down without visual warning.

Motorcyclists often adjust position within a lane to be seen more easily and to minimize the effects of road debris, passing vehicles, and wind. Understand that motorcyclists adjust lane

position for a purpose not to be reckless, to show off or to allow drivers to share the lane with them.

Stopping distances for motorcycles are nearly the same as for cars but slippery conditions makes stopping quickly very difficult for motorcycle riders.

How you can help motorcyclists

- Look specifically for motorcyclists, especially at intersections. If you are stopped waiting to turn left look down the road in front of you for an approaching motorcyclists and look around and behind the approaching cars/trucks for a hidden motorcycle rider
- If you see a motorcyclist, wait for them to pass. Expect the motorcyclist to arrive quicker than you think. Don't pull out even if you think there is space
- Always check your mirrors and turn your head to check blind spots. Look specifically for motorcyclists
- Give motorcyclists plenty of room when following or catching up to them. They can slow without the brake light activating
- Leave more room when the conditions are wet
- Never attempt to share a lane with a motorcyclists
- Slow down. Your speed can literally make the difference between life and death

Summary

You must search specifically for vulnerable road users. There are no "take-backs." If you crash into a vulnerable road user it is highly likely the pedestrian, bicyclist or motorcyclist will suffer serious injury or will be killed and you will have to live with the consequences of your actions for the rest of your life. Slow down - the higher the collision speed the more catastrophic the result for the vulnerable user.

*SMARTER-usa.org, 2019
Smarter-usa@gmail.com*