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E-bikes & Safety: Don't Break Your Back

As e-bikes become more popular, any incident related to riding an e-bike can turn a spotlight on the entire industry.

Read the manual

You might think you know how to ride an e-bike, you might actually know how to ride an e-bike, you might be an expert e-bike rider but you should still read the manual. Every e-bike is different and offers different features in acceleration, throttle control and pedal assist. It's good to know the defaults and how sensitive the controls are. Familiarise yourself with all the safety and control features of your e-bike before riding and you are already on your way to avoiding injury.

The obvious safety precautions

When it comes to e-bike safety a lot of what holds true for riding a standard bike holds true for e-bikes. Always wear a helmet and make sure that it fits properly. If you are riding an e-bike that goes up to 96kph you also might want to consider full head protection, like a motorcycle helmet. Generally, a regular bike helmet is acceptable, but the faster you are planning to go, the more comprehensive your e-bike helmet should be.

Other safety precautions that should be obvious (but aren't, based on the e-bike riders I see around town) are simple things to keep you alive like using your lights and riding with traffic. When riding your e-bike you should always at least use a rear, red, blinking LED light. At night, the more lights the better. Add a front light and even spoke lights. Every light you have on your e-bike is one step closer to not becoming splattered across the road.

As well as riding with the flow of traffic. Too often I see e-bike riders cruising along in the bike lane or on the shoulder against traffic. This is exponentially more dangerous than riding with traffic. You are on a motorized vehicle and laws support your movements as part of traffic as long as you are moving with it. Riding against it is just stupid. Drivers have a harder time seeing someone riding toward them on the shoulder than in the same direction. It sounds odd, but think about it. If you are riding toward traffic, you are creating visual gaps that put you in more danger.

Less obvious safety precautions

Use a mirror and keep your tyres inflated. A mirror helps you see traffic (duh) and with more electric cars on the road, this is a very cheap and helpful feature. Your e-bike is louder than some cars these days, so being able to see them helps avoid getting hit by them. As for your tyres; properly inflated tires help your e-bike grip the road better and will come in handy during accident avoidance. You might never get in an accident on your e-bike, but you will surely avoid plenty. Having well inflated tyres means better control during quick manoeuvres.

Always be a defensive driver. When you are riding your e-bike, assume that every car on the road is an accident waiting to happen. Regardless of how fast you think you are riding on your e-bike, most drivers feel you are going slow and often will make turns right in front of you, or cut you off without adjusting for your speed. We're not just talking about drunk drivers here, we're talking about all drivers. Watch your corners.

One of the best ways to combat this is to not only be a defensive e-bike rider, but to make eye contact with drivers when possible. This lets you know that they know that you know that they know you are there. While this isn't always possible (with tinted windows and particular angles), it's really helpful in traffic circles, which are a mess to begin with.

The gist of all this is to constantly be on guard when you are riding your e-bike. From reading the manual to be sure of what you are dealing with, to checking other drivers and your mirrors, safety should be your number one concern when riding an e-bike. Your safety.

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