

Safety Tips #12

By Ben Hochberg, ABATE of Colorado

Tailgating – It’s No Party!

Tailgating, or following too closely, is bad news. Let’s discuss the two types of tailgating: when someone is following you too closely, and when you are too close to the vehicle in front of you.

Being tailgated: It feels uncomfortable, doesn’t it? And rightly so, because it’s dangerous. If you have to stop quickly, the vehicle behind you has to stop even more quickly in order to avoid hitting you. Problem is, most motorcycles can stop more quickly than most cars. Having stopping power like that can be a good thing, but not in this situation! Moreover, it’s possible that the driver behind you is not paying close attention to what’s happening in the traffic mix, which will delay his or her reaction to your change of speed. So if you are being tailgated, you have to do something about it rather quickly. What can be done about it?

Flash your brake light a couple of times; maybe that will serve to alert the driver behind you that he/she is too close. Make sure you have plenty of following distance between you and the vehicle ahead of you, so that if you have to slow down or stop, you can do it more gradually, and you will give the tailgating driver behind you more time to get slowed or stopped. This technique may also encourage the tailgater to pass you, which is probably a good thing. (It’s always better to have an offensive driver ahead of you so you can better keep an eye on them.) Another option may be to change lanes. If none of this serves to mitigate the problem you must consider putting on your turn signal, gradually slowing, down and pulling off the road to let the tailgater pass. I know, we shouldn’t have to do this, but, as they say, “It’s not who’s right, it’s who’s left.”

Following too closely: If our bikes can be stopped more quickly than most cars, what’s wrong with following the vehicle ahead more closely than we would if we were driving a car? One thing is that there may be a vehicle behind you that can’t get stopped quickly enough and then you could get sandwiched between that vehicle and the vehicle ahead. Not good. Another thing is that you become less visible to others in the traffic mix if you are close behind another vehicle. A good rule of thumb is to leave adequate following distance between you and the vehicle ahead. We can measure this

in units of time (seconds); it has been suggested that a minimum of two seconds of following distance is a good figure to start with. Notice, please, that I said “minimum.” Under certain conditions, two seconds is not enough, such as night riding, wet weather or other slippery conditions, higher speeds, or situations in which there may be a lot of inattentive drivers on the road, like rush hour traffic or immediately following an event at which many have been imbibing adult beverages.

Sometimes we just cannot maintain a comfortable or appropriate following distance, no matter what we try to do. One thing we can do to mitigate the higher level of risk is to “cover” our motorcycles’ controls, that is, to have our hands and feet poised over the hand and foot controls, thereby shaving off a tiny bit of reaction time should we need it. We’re not talking about a lot of time here, but it may make the necessary difference.