

Safety Tips #30

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Are You COOL?

How about *cold*? Earlier this year I wrote an article about hot weather riding; hey, it was summer. And now... it's getting cooler out; it will be winter in a couple of months. Some of us ride year-round (weather permitting) and some of us park our bikes until it gets warmer again. But I know we are all tempted to get out and ride when that cabin fever sets in, and if we give in to that temptation we may be faced with riding in conditions that are colder than those to which we are usually accustomed. We should all know our limits, but sometimes we have to push the envelope in order to determine what those limits are. And when we are determining our limits with regard to cold-weather riding we will find ourselves *chilled*. Riding until our core body temperatures start to get lower is very problematic, so let's talk about what to do if that starts to happen, as well as how to avoid the situation entirely.

Author David Hough, in *Proficient Motorcycling*, says, "A core temperature that is too cold is called hypothermia. Only a couple of degrees below normal temperature can be life threatening." He also says that if you find yourself facing this possibility, "...before you continue rushing off across the landscape into worsening conditions, pull over

alongside the road, shut the engine down, and spend a few minutes focusing on the situation. OK, it's cold and the wind is howling. But get out the map. Huddle down in the lee of the bike, warm your fingers on the engine, look at the options, and make a decision. Is it wise to keep going, or should you beat a retreat?" In either case, you're already cold, so figure out what you can do right away. In extreme cases, get out the cell phone and call for help. In less extreme cases, you will need to add some insulation to help keep your body temperature up. (A helmet does a good job of insulating the head; a full-face helmet does the best job, because it keeps more of that cold wind off your face than an open helmet does. Personally I do not prefer full-face helmets, but I have one, and it is my choice for use in cold weather.) I have found that insulating my neck is critical to staying warm. I have several methods for this: I wear a layer of poly-fleece under my riding jacket, one that has a high zip-up collar. I usually wear a bandanna around my neck. And in extreme cases I wear a fleece neck warmer made for me by a friend. I have seen ready-made products made of leather, fleece-lined leather and nylon in various motorcycle shops and on-line, too. Check out www.riderwearhouse.com for some excellent gear choices. Some folks use a balaclava; if you choose one of these, make sure it does not interfere with the proper fit of your helmet. Keeping your neck warm makes a huge difference. But what about the rest of your body? Keep the wind off you as much as possible. Probably your riding jacket is a wind block; but what about your legs? Are they protected from the heat-robbing wind? Denim doesn't do the trick; chaps, leather pants, or a riding suit are good options.

I always carry some type of insulated garments with me in my saddlebags or tank bag when I venture out in winter, just in case. I now have a “secret weapon”, one that I resisted for years: a heated vest. These things are the greatest (with only one drawback, which I’ll get to soon). Heated clothing plugs into your bikes electrical outlet. (Some bikes have them built in and other bikes require them to be added, which is a rather simple task. You will need to make sure that your bikes electrical system can handle the extra load.) When it gets really cold I whip out the electric vest, plug it in, and all of a sudden I am getting warm again. I have even used this in summer, during long rides in a cool rain. They don’t cost a lot of money and they really work! Heated clothing is now available in more than just vests; I already got heated gloves, and I am considering a heated jacket liner. These are just like vests but have sleeves which are heated, too. But back to that drawback I mentioned earlier: if something happens to the heated clothing’s circuitry, or to the bike’s electrical system, you are out of luck and your “ace in the hole” is no longer useful. So it’s not a good idea to depend on this stuff when our lives can be at stake. I’ve never had this happen to me, but that doesn’t mean it won’t ever occur... I usually carry at least one extra insulated garment with me, the kind that doesn’t depend on electricity to work.

OK, now on to part two: how to avoid the situation entirely. Obviously we can predict prior to departure if the weather is likely to be so cold that it causes us problems. And we still have the choice to NOT RIDE. If we choose to ride anyway we can plan our route to stay away from the places that are likely to be extra cold, like higher elevations. We

can plan to ride only in the mildest part of the day. We can dress appropriately for conditions. We can plan frequent stops at places where we can warm up.

In my experience I find I can be comfortable riding when the temperatures dip down to the higher 20's (Fahrenheit) - on my bike that has a windshield and fairing and an electrical power source. But if I suspect there might be freezing rain or snow along the route, I will leave the bike parked in the garage!

Stay cool (but not COLD)!