

Safety Tips #33
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Check It Out!

Check it out – before you ride it, or, “The Pre-Ride Inspection.” Before you go riding, do you inspect the bike first? Sure, it’s easy to skip this activity, especially if you have been using the bike a lot and it seems to have been performing properly. But skipping it is not a good idea, even when the bike is in daily use; and now that our bikes are getting less use due to unfavorable weather conditions it becomes even more important to do a pre-ride check each time we intend to ride.

It should be obvious that doing a pre-ride check on a bike is more important than doing it on a car; there are higher consequences for mechanical malfunctions on a bike compared to a four-wheeler. It helps to have a checklist to make it easy, systematic and thorough. Some items are more critical than others, but those critical ones need to be checked for each ride. In rider education we use a system called “T-CLOCS”, which stands for Tires, Controls, Lights, Oil, Chassis, and Stands.

- Tires should be checked for overall condition, items like tread depth, age cracks, embedded objects, uneven wear, and bulges. Check the air pressure (when the tire is cold)! Low air pressure is the most common reason for tire failure.

Remember that pressure in the tires changes with the ambient temperature of the environment. The colder it gets, the less pressure is in the tires. Also check the wheels. If the wheels use spokes, make sure the tension is even for each spoke and that there are no spokes missing. If the bike has cast wheels, check for cracks or dents. Glance at the rims to see if they are obviously out of round or true. It helps to have a bike stand for this, but it is not absolutely necessary. Grab the tire at the

- top and bottom and see if there is free play in the wheel bearings. Glance at the bearing area to see if there is too much grease that has escaped from the bearing.
- Controls should be checked to be sure that they aren't broken, cracked or bent, and that they are properly adjusted. Cables and pivot points should be lubricated and should operate smoothly. The throttle assembly should operate freely and should snap closed when released. Glance at the fuel lines; and if the bike is water-cooled, look at the hoses as well.
 - Lights should be checked to make sure they all work, but also look for cracked lenses and reflectors, and that the headlight is aimed correctly. Headlights usually have to be adjusted if you are carrying a passenger. Also take a look at the battery terminals; see if there is corrosion present and if the connections are tight.
 - Oil level needs to be up to where it should be. Different bikes have different recommended methods for checking oil level. Consult your owner's manual for this. Also check the fuel level, and the coolant level if the bike has that. Look around the bike for any leaks that can be seen for any type of fluid. Some bikes have separate reservoirs for transmission and/or final drive oil as well, so check those as appropriate.
 - Chassis should be checked for cracks and bends. Check the steering for smooth and thorough motion throughout its range. With the rear wheel off the ground push and pull the swingarm to ensure the bushings are tight. Make sure the suspension is working well and that it rebounds smoothly as soon as weight is removed. You can check the front suspension by straddling the bike, applying the front brake, and then pushing forward on the handlebar. The suspension should compress smoothly, and it should rebound smoothly when you stop pushing forward. If the suspension is adjustable, make sure it is set properly for the type of use you

are going to give it. And here's one that often goes without proper attention: the drive chain. Some bikes are driven by a shaft, some by a belt, but most are driven by a chain. They stretch with use, and have to be adjusted as well as cleaned and lubricated. Folks often skip this, because dealing with the chain can be a dirty, greasy job. Too bad! Get 'er done: it's important! When a chain fails (breaks) not only will it end your ride on the spot, it can be a violent and dangerous situation. Take care of the chain and it will take care of you. Consult the owner's manual for information on this. If your bike has a belt drive, check the tension of the belt.

- Stands – it seems all bikes have a sidestand (that's "jiffy stand" in Harley-speak, and some have a center stand as well. Make sure they aren't cracked or bent and that their springs are in place so the stands retract properly when you want them to. Stands occasionally need to be lubricated.

Wow! That's a lot of stuff to check before each ride! Well, not really. Not all of that stuff has to be checked daily... Some things are more critical than others. Here is the short list that, *from my experience*, of the ones that should never be skipped no matter how frequently the bike is ridden:

1. Tire pressure and possible embedded objects.
2. Control operation, particularly throttle and (both) brakes.
3. All lights (tail, brake, turn signals, high and low beam headlights, and whatever else your bike may have).
4. Engine oil.
5. Drive chain (or belt) tension.

Most of the other items can be done less frequently, like each week, if your bike is in regular use. The short list can be done in 5 minutes. The complete list will take a bit longer, but it's all part of the satisfaction of maintaining your bike properly, and that's something of which to be proud.