

Rain Riding

Smooth Control

This is not just about being gentle on the brakes and throttle, but also ensuring that you balance your need for grip. In dry weather it is easy to accelerate away from a turn even when the bike is banked over, but the risk of a slide increases in the wet as your available grip is split between cornering and accelerating. If you aim to complete the turn before you accelerate, your demand for grip will be reduced. The same applies to cornering - if you settle your entry speed early, you will be less likely to need to brake mid corner.

Forward Planning

Last minute reactions should always be avoided, particularly in the wet. If you plan ahead, you should be able to anticipate where you need to brake, position and accelerate. This will enable you to make better use of engine braking for corners and junctions, rather than just relying on the brakes.

Engine braking reduces the risk of skidding, as your wheels are unlikely to lock up. However, it is important to be sympathetic to your bike, by allowing the revs to drop before changing to a lower gear. If you change down too early, you risk momentarily locking the back wheel and could potentially strain the engine, gearbox, and chain. It is also important to note any following traffic, which may be expecting to see a brake light before you slow down.

How does bad weather affect the rider?

If you were lucky enough to remember your rain gear, then you will be able to proceed in relative comfort. If you did not, then after about 10 minutes, you will be soaked through. Apart from being unpleasant, you will after a while start to feel cold and will be more reluctant to move about on the bike. It is important not to underestimate how this affects you. Visibility is reduced in bad weather, so riding with your lights on and wearing some high visibility clothing is important.

I'll Take Mine Straight Up and Slow Please

Most riders get used to riding in the rain by accident. They takeoff on an all day ride when the sun is shining and by afternoon they realize they are going to get their first taste of wet asphalt, like it or not. Those who accept it soon find themselves venturing back into the rain, sometimes at their own will.

Many never ride in the rain the first year they are up on two wheels. They are timid about it the second year, feeling more confident by the third and by the fourth year they are asking the question - "What Rain?"

So suppose you are thinking about getting on a wet road for the first time, or perhaps you have done it a few times, or perhaps you do it so much you are not thinking about what the hazards are.

Here is a list of critical rain hazards to watch for:

Painted Lines - Crosswalks can be unsafe for motorcyclists, particularly if you are turning right or left and crossing the lines at an angle. Slow down more than usual and make the turn straight up, rather than in a lean.

Same for diamonds in the HOV lanes, these are very nasty when you lean into one, especially on the freeway. The diamond is shaped so you just slide across it and continue to slide along it.

Any painted line is a hazard. Until the DOT addresses the issue and comes up with a tackier texture, you are the one in control of your destiny.

Surface Textures - Many commercial and residential parking areas are paved with very slick concrete surfaces. Your wet entry into the local mall, housing, apartment or condominium complex can put you on the ground in a second. Again, ride slow and straight up and do not let the concrete bite you.

Rubber - If you thought you might save some money by buying long lasting tires, think again. Such tires are typically not as tacky and have less traction when the rain comes out. Next time you change tires look for the tackiest one that will take care of you better during your riding adventures.

In addition, that rubber they use around railroad tracks to decrease the sound as cars drive over them. Forget those little circles on the surface, these provide zero traction to you as you cross. Cross them slow and straight up.

Steel - Manhole covers are enemy number one and railroad tracks rank a close second. Making a turn over the surface of them sets you up for trouble. Avoid such, or keep the bike straight up and cross over it slowly.

Railroad tracks have a way of popping up on you just after a turn and you may still be into a lean when you reach them. Look for the crossing signs ahead of time, slow down, and stay straight up when crossing.

Grated bridge crossings and metal plates are a nasty encounter in the rain. Look at where you want to ride, take it slow and do not try any fancy dancing, particularly a lane change.

Water - Puddles/Pot Holes - It only takes once to know how this one feels. You cruise through a puddle and after it is too late, you realize you just went into a pothole that wants to suck you into the underworld more painfully than Satan himself beating you down with a stick. Avoid puddles if you can. Use caution and predict the possibility ahead of time. Recovery from this rude awakening is not always easy. Pull over and take a few minutes of rest if you need to gather your wits.

Oil - It is everywhere and very illusive. Those little red and blue rainbows on the ground mean danger. Ride slow and straight up. As per the motorcycle safety manual, if you're caught in the first rain following a few dry days remember the roads are covered with lots of oil and dirt that will be lifted from the surface in the first 30-60 minutes of a new rain. Take a coffee break if you can.

Tires - As a motorcyclist, it is harder to ignore the changing situation, as both you and your bike perform very differently in the wet. The reduction in tire adhesion will be the most obvious difference, typically around 50% but it can be significantly more with soft compound sports tires (having a dry weather bias). Although this is not to say that, a hard compound touring tire will necessarily produce more grip, just that the change will be less noticeable. Your motorcycle and street tires are designed to handle well in both wet and dry situations. Trust your motorcycle, but most of all, trust your ability. Ride conservatively on wet pavement and use good judgment to make it to your destination safely.

In Summary

Wet weather riding does not have to be avoided. If you give yourself more space, compensate for other drivers, who do not adjust and focus on smoothness and planning, you will reduce the risks. Additionally, keeping an eye on how the rain affects you will also help prevent you from making mistakes.