

How Bicycle Laws Apply to You -- the Bicyclist

Part 2 of 2

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For the Bicycle Federation of Wisconsin

Bicyclists are often uncertain which laws apply to them on the road. But the laws are basically the same as those which apply to motorists. If you know the laws that apply to driving a car, you know the laws that apply to bicycling.

Bicycles are vehicles. As vehicle operators, bicyclists have the same rights -- and responsibilities -- as the drivers of motor vehicles.

Bicycles always ride on the right, in the same direction as other traffic. Bicycles are a part of traffic flow.

What confuses many people is how far to the right to ride.

The law says to ride as far to the right as is practicable. Practicable generally means safe and reasonable. However, Wisconsin's statutes do list a few situations when it is not practicable to ride to the right, these include when: passing another vehicle traveling in the same direction; preparing for a left turn; necessary to avoid unsafe conditions, including fixed or moving objects, parked or moving vehicles, pedestrians, animals, surface hazards, or substandard width lanes (a lane too narrow for a bicycle and a motor vehicle to safely share).

This will mean different things at different times. Mid-block, your lane position depends largely on the width of the lane and your speed vis-à-vis other traffic. The faster you are traveling (such as down hill) the further left you need to be to avoid hazards.

At intersections, your lane position depends on where you are going -- right for a right turn, towards the center to go straight, to the left (or in a left turn lane) for a left turn.

On a one-way street with two or more lanes, you may ride near the left or right-hand side of the roadway as practicable (but only in the same direction as other traffic).

Bicycles may be ridden on the shoulder of a highway.

Making turns, especially left turns, can be confusing. There are really two ways a bicyclist can make a left turn -- as you would in a car or as a pedestrian.

To turn as though driving a car, you need to be in the correct lane or on the correct side of your lane. To change your position, first look behind you to see if the way is clear. When the way is clear signal and move to the proper position.

To make a turn like a pedestrian, ride straight through the intersection on the right side, get off your bicycle, walk across the street and continue on your way.

Wisconsin Bicyclists are required to use the same hand signals as motorists when turning or changing lanes. Signaling is not required when you need both hands to control the bicycle.

A bicyclist passing a stopped or moving vehicle is required to give at least 3 feet of clearance.

Riding side-by-side is permitted on any street as long as other traffic is not impeded. When riding two-abreast both riders must ride within a single lane.

Riding on sidewalks may be permitted by local ordinance otherwise, it is prohibited. When it is allowed, bicyclists must yield to pedestrians and give an audible warning (voice, bell) when passing pedestrians traveling in the same direction. At intersections a bicyclist on the sidewalk has the same rights and duties as a pedestrian.

Lights are required when bicycling at night. You must have a white front headlight and a red rear reflector. These are required on streets, paths and sidewalks. A red or amber steady or flashing rear light may be used in addition to the rear reflector.

The lighting law provides for a minimum level of lighting and reflectors. This may not be enough. Buy the best lights you can afford.

Bicycle registration is a local option. Check with your city clerk or police department to see if bicycle registration is required in your community.

DISCLAIMER: Refer to Wisconsin State Statutes for actual wording of the laws.

A copy of the statutes related to bicycle use is available from the Bicycle Federation of Wisconsin. Contact them at www.bfw.org, (608) 251-4456 or bfw@mailbag.com. BFW also has a wallet-sized card summarizing these laws and a brochure "Traffic? Get over it!" -- an introduction to bicycle operation in traffic.

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