

Rider Education: A continuing Awareness

Winter? And I want to ride!

Let's consider some of the implications of cold weather riding. ***Turning Back:***

There is a lot of wisdom in knowing when to turn around. Ascending the Angeles Crest highway, we were passed at warp speeds by a rider carving corners on a Ducati. But at first sign of frost in the shadows, the Ducati rider wisely turned around and zoomed back downhill. Being on the trike, we had additional options, so we continued. But if I had run into sleet up there, I would have turned around also. It's not smart to keep motoring ahead into worsening conditions if you have a choice.

On the other hand, if you're in the middle of a cross-country trip when you're caught in a winter storm, the only sensible option may be to continue ahead. Say you're making a transit across Utah. The next warm restaurant is 40 miles away in Salina, and the last one was 60 miles back in Green River. That front is going to run over you whether you stop, retreat, or continue, so you might as well keep moving toward Salina. Now, one of these days you're going to find yourself in this situation, and I want you to remember this: Before you continue rushing off across the landscape into worsening conditions, pull over alongside the road, shut down the engine, and squander a few minutes focusing on the situation. Okay, it's cold and the wind is howling. Get out the map. Huddle down in the lee of the bike, warm your fingers on the engine, take a look at the map, and make a decision. Is it wise to keep going should you beat a retreat? If the only option is to keep going, what extra insulation can you add under your riding gear? Remind yourself of the symptoms of hypothermia.

To understand the tactics for protecting the body, let's remember how the human heating and cooling system functions. The body "burns" food to generate heat, and pumps warmed oxygen-rich blood throughout its system. Blood near the skin surface gives off heat to the air. The lungs absorb oxygen from the air and expels warm water vapor and carbon dioxide. The body automatically adjusts blood pressure, blood flow, and breathing rate to maintain an almost constant temperature of the central core regardless of outside air temperature. If the core temperature begins to increase or decrease, the system quickly attempts to correct it. A core temperature that is too cold is called hypothermia. Only a couple of degrees below normal temperature can be life threatening. When the body senses a drop in core temperature, the response is to shut down blood flow to the extremities, starting with fingers and toes. If necessary to save the vital core organs, the system will sacrifice fingers and toes to frostbite. What isn't so obvious is that the head is an extremity, too. Large arteries along both sides of the neck carry warm blood to the head. So when the heating system decreases blood flow to the extremities, there's also less blood and less oxygen going to the brain. The bottom line is that as you become hypothermic, your woozy brain may not be able to recognize what's happening. For motorcyclists, the hazard is that a chilled, oxygen-starved brain starts making silly mistakes. At first, maybe it's just stopping the bike without putting a foot down, or cruising off the road onto the shoulder, then laughing giddily at the result. It should be obvious that in a hypothermic state, a rider can make serious or even fatal control errors such as crossing the centerline or going wide into a power pole. If you really begin to chill down, it may seem perfectly sensible to run off into a field, lean up against a tree, and go to sleep.

One of the most important defenses against hypothermia is insulation of the head and neck. The major blood flow to the head means it can radiate a lot of heat, unless it is insulated. Insulating the neck slows down heat loss from those big arteries, and provides warmer blood to the brain. Neck insulation is vitally important to a motorcyclist because our heads and necks are hanging out in the wind stream.