

Traffic Laws Relating to Bicycles

Handbook for Motorists and Bicyclists

Traffic rules exist to improve everyone's safety. Most crashes can be avoided if both bicyclists and motorists follow the rules of the road.

Revised August 2018

Guidelines for Motorists

Drivers can make the roads safer by obeying the speed limit, watching and slowing down for people walking and bicycling, and leaving plenty of room when passing.

Bicyclists are, by law, drivers of vehicles. Bicyclists have the same rights as motorists to be on the road. (TCA 55-8-172, COK 17-443)

When passing bicyclists, you are required to **pass at a safe distance** and maintain that distance until safely past the bicyclist. Giving 3 feet is the minimum, but more space is recommended if speed limits are above 40 mph or if you are going uphill (bicyclists are more likely to swerve when going up a hill). (TCA 55-8-175; COK 17-446)

If the lane is too narrow for a motorist to safely pass a bicyclist within the travel lane, while still allowing 3' for passing, **the law allows the bicyclist to ride in the center of the lane.** The driver simply waits for a safe time to pass, just as if the driver were behind a slow-moving car.

Due Care

Every driver of a vehicle shall exercise due care by operating the vehicle at a safe speed, by maintaining a safe lookout, by keeping the vehicle under proper control and by devoting full time and attention to operating the vehicle, under the existing circumstances as necessary in order to be able to see and to avoid endangering life, limb or property and to see and avoid colliding with any other vehicle or person (TCA 55-8-136; COK 17-472)

Failure to Yield – Rules of the Road

If a motorist fails to yield or to exercise due care while driving and the crash results in serious injury or death, the law allows jail time and loss of driver's license. (TCA 55-8-197,)

Mobile devices

Tennessee law prohibits using a hand-held mobile electronic device to send or read a text message while driving. (TCA 55-8-199)

It's illegal to talk on cell phone while driving through a school zone. (TCA 55-8-207)

Guidelines for Bicyclists

For bicyclists, following the rules of the road is the most important step to stay safe. Following the rules makes the streets safer and predictable for everyone.

Stop and yield to cross traffic before entering a road from a driveway or sidewalk. Stop at stop signs. Stop at red lights. Remember, you are the driver of a vehicle and have the same rights AND the same responsibilities as motorists. ((TCA 55-8-109 and 172, COK 17-443 and 503).

Be predictable and visible. A bicyclist should ride to the right, but far enough away from the edge of the road that you don't have to swerve to avoid hazards. Moving left when the lane is too narrow for a bicycle and another vehicle to pass side by side helps motorists who might otherwise misjudge passing space. (COK 17-446)

Ride with traffic. A bicyclist who rides facing oncoming traffic increases his/her risk of being hit by a motorist. Drivers entering and exiting the roadway at side streets and driveways do not expect bicyclists to approach from the wrong direction.

Wear a helmet. It is the law to wear a helmet if you are riding an e-bike or if you are under 16. But we recommend protecting your brain, no matter what age you are!

Lights on at dusk. Use a red rear light and a white front light whenever you ride at dusk or after dark. A bicycle without lights at night is nearly invisible. Headlights are not just used so that the bicyclist can see where he/she is going—the most important purpose of lights is to let motorists know that the bicyclist is there. (The law only requires a rear red reflector, but we recommend a rear red light.)

Other Laws

Paved shoulders

Since the definition of “roadway” excludes the shoulder (55-8-101), bicyclists are not required to ride on the shoulder, although they may prefer to do so. Shoulders are often filled with debris and broken glass, so they are not always good places to ride.

Bike lanes

Motorists cannot park or drive in a bike lane, unless they are preparing to turn. (TCA 55-8-205; COK 17-211)

Bicyclists are not required to ride in bike lanes, for the same reasons as described under Paved Shoulders.

Road Position for Bicyclists

Bicyclists moving more slowly than other traffic should ride as close as practicable to the right-hand curb or edge of the roadway, except:

- When overtaking and passing another vehicle proceeding in the same direction;
- When preparing for a left turn at an intersection or into a private road or driveway; or
- When reasonably necessary to avoid conditions including, but not limited to, parked vehicles, animals, surface hazards, or a lane that is too narrow for a bicycle and another vehicle to travel safely side by side within the lane.
(TCA 55-8-175; COK 17-44)

Riding side-by-side

Bicyclists shall not ride more than two abreast, except on paths or parts of roadways set aside for the exclusive use of bicycles. Persons riding two abreast shall not impede the normal and reasonable movement of traffic and, on a laned roadway, shall ride within a single lane. (TCA 55-8-175, COK 17-446)

Helmet law

With regard to any bicycle operated on any highway, street or sidewalk, all bicyclists under age 16 must wear a bicycle helmet. (TCA 55-52-105; COK 17-455)

Sidewalk Riding

The City of Knoxville and Knox County allow bicycles to be operated on sidewalks and in crosswalks, but bicyclists must act like pedestrians instead of vehicles. Bicyclists must yield to pedestrians and give audible warnings before passing pedestrians. Bicyclists are not allowed on sidewalks where they are prohibited by official traffic control devices. (COK Sec. 17-448)

Although it is legal, bicycling on sidewalks is not recommended except for small children. Motorists are not looking for or expecting bicyclists on a sidewalk, which creates dangerous situations every time the bicyclist crosses a driveway or intersection. Many people assume riding on sidewalks is safer than on the road, but studies have shown it to be more dangerous. 39% of crashes in our region involving bicyclists involve sidewalk-riding

Traffic signals

At some signalized intersections, an electrical circuit with loops embedded in the pavement is used to detect vehicles waiting for a green light. The light will not turn green until the sensor detects metal, indicating the presence of a vehicle. Some sensors are not sensitive enough to detect the metal in a bicycle, and some bicycles are made of carbon fiber and do not contain enough metal to be detected. The most sensitive position for a bicycle to be detected is directly over the pavement cut. An unresponsive loop should be reported to the local traffic engineering office.

If a traffic signal with a detection device is not working for bicycles, the bicyclist shall come to a full stop and proceed with caution when it is safe to do so. (TCA 55-8-110)