How to Check Motorcycle Brakes & What Would You Do?

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Faulty motorcycle brakes can be both costly and dangerous. If you just bought, or are planning to buy, a new motorcycle, one of the first things to check is the condition of the motorcycle brakes. Knowing how to check motorcycle brakes can help you avoid accidents and unnecessary repairs arising from subsequent damage. These tips will describe some of the things to look for when checking motorcycle brakes.

Check your rear brake. Using your hand or foot, push the rear brake pedal downwards. It should be hard (but not too hard) and not squishy, soft, or spongy. Visually inspect the brake pads. You can shine a flashlight on the pads so that you can examine them more clearly. The inner and outer pads should be thick enough; otherwise the grip will not be as hard. The brake pads push on the brake rotors when you engage the brake; the contact results in friction that causes the rotor to slow down and eventually stop turning. If your brake pads are thin and worn, there will be the possibility of metal to metal to contact, resulting in longer stopping time, or worse, damage to the rotors.

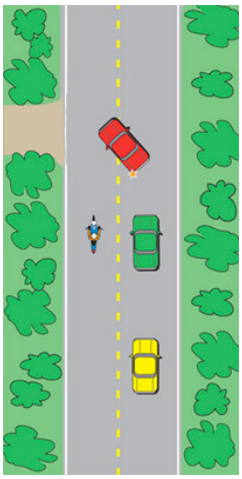
While you're at it, examine the brake rotors, as well. The rotors are strong metal discs attached to the wheel. They come in contact with the brake pads when the brake is engaged and should never be loose or damaged. Check for scratches, bumps, accumulated dirt, or debris on the rotor surface. The surface should be clean and smooth. Rough rotor surfaces can wear out your brake pads faster. Look for signs of malfunction or damage in the brake calipers. The brake calipers push the brake pads so that the pads squeeze the rotors when the brake is engaged. The calipers should be firmly secured to the frame and front forks.

Check the front brake in the same manner as described for checking the rear brake. The front brake is controlled by the front brake lever. If you squeeze the lever, it should be hard (again, not too hard) and not squishy, soft, or spongy. Check the front brake pads in the same manner as you checked the rear brake pads.

Make sure the motorcycle has enough brake fluid. Check the brake fluid level and whether the vehicle has the correct brake fluid type specified by the manufacturer. Be on the lookout for brake fluid leaks, too. A leak in the brake fluid definitely indicates some problem in the brake system. It could indicate damage in the pipes or other parts of the brake system. It could probably signal some loose connections in the pipes through which the fluid circulates. A good preflight here is important. Remember a lot of stopping power is in the front brakes so give this area special attention.

Your motorcycle's brake system should be in perfect condition for your motorcycle to function smoothly. Even the slightest anomaly in any of the brake system parts can cause the entire motorcycle to work improperly. Therefore, you should know what to check when examining your motorcycle's brake system so that you can immediately fix the problem before it can cause damage.

What Would You Do? Situational Awareness Lesson #47



OVERTAKING: You are riding in a rural area on a two-lane road. You have been traveling at 55 mph all day but are now stuck behind three cars moving at 35. You are not in a big hurry, but you are annoyed and getting impatient. Finally: a passing zone! There is no oncoming traffic so you signal, check your mirror and blind spot, pull out to pass and accelerate.

As you come alongside the row of cars, your eye catches a turn signal flashing and you suddenly realize there's a driveway coming up on the left. Your heart drops into your stomach, and you watch in slow motion as the lead car turns left in front of you. What would you do?

At this point, it is usually too late to avoid a collision. (See "The Reality" below for strategies to avoid this type of situation altogether.) Some riders attempt to slow down, but they are rarely successful because they ignore the front brake, stomp on the rear

brake, lay the bike down and slide into or underneath the turning car.

The Better Response- Again, it's probably too late to avoid a collision, but you may be able to lessen the impact. The better response is to immediately apply maximum straight-line braking, using both brakes simultaneously, to get your speed down. Remember, in an emergency, 75 percent or more of your stopping power comes from the front brake. Do not lock either wheel or lay the bike down.

The Reality- Riders are killed and injured every year falling into this trap. Unfortunately, once the error has been made, there's rarely an escape. The root causes of this crash are the rider's lack of visual lead, observational skills and judgment. When you are stuck behind slow-moving, two-lane traffic, instead of rushing an impatient overtake of multiple vehicles in a row, stop and ask yourself ***why*** traffic is moving so slowly.

Even when visibility is good, driveways and farm-field entrances are easily hidden. Beginners and experienced riders alike miss the clues that warn them what's ahead -- a break in the trees, a telltale mailbox. Look as far up the road as you can for likely turnouts. Overtake slower vehicles one at a time.

In rural areas, slow-moving traffic will rarely hold you up very long – it's often a local resident traveling a short distance. Remember, riding a motorcycle is about the *journey* and not the *destination*: take your time, enjoy the ride, and don't ever, ever get so impatient that it can put you in harm's way.

"Be careful out there….it's a jungle." *Steve*