

Riding a Motorcycle in Cold Weather

Riding a motorcycle in the winter can be tough, but the right cold weather gear and some tips to help navigate cold and icy roads can go a long way. The first thing any rider should do is check the forecast. Checking the weather is standard procedure for any motorcyclist, but this is especially true during the winter months. Whether you're planning for a long ride, or simply need to bike to work the next day, the temperature outside will determine more than you think, and staying tuned in to the forecast is essential.

Riding in the Snow and Ice

If you get caught in a snowstorm, rule number one is don't panic. Riding a motorcycle in the snow simply requires you to slow down, be smooth, and allow plenty of distance for braking. It's also important to ensure other vehicles aren't following too closely. Falling down at such a low speed probably won't cause a serious injury, but a car behind you that can't stop in time certainly can. Snow will also undoubtedly make you harder to see. Other vehicles are more likely to cut you off or stop without warning, and it's best to get off the road as soon as possible.

The other hazard of riding a motorcycle in cold weather is ice. Be extra cautious over bridges that might freeze and be alert for black ice in shady areas. If you must cross an icy patch, keep the bike slow, straight and steady. It's common for tires to stiffen up in such conditions, and this will hurt your traction on the road even more.

Prepare your bike.

Tire pressure can decrease about 1 PSI (pound per square inch) for every 10 degrees the temperature drops. It's not that more air is escaping your tires, but rather the air inside the tire condenses, taking up less space when it's cold. It's similar to how a cake, just out of the oven, flattens out a bit as it cools.

Managing Bike Fluids in Cold Weather

Maintaining fluid levels is critical to keeping your bike working during the winter. You should consistently check oil and antifreeze levels to prevent internal damage, and keep your gas tank half full to prevent the gas lines from freezing.

Block the wind.

A tall windscreen set to the highest position will provide protection from cold wind. If your bike doesn't have one, even mounting a small windshield on your handlebars will help by diverting the wind from your chest. Be sure to wear a tightly sealed helmet with a fog-free face shield.

The wind chill factor

So ultimately, wind chill is only an attempt by science to describe the sensation of cold on the skin as it is affected by wind. It's not an actual unit of measurement, and it varies from person to person depending on their tolerance to cold, what they are wearing, and even the level of moisture in the air.

The wind isn't actually causing the temperature to drop; it only feels like it is *to humans*, because of the body's physical response to cold. By constantly blowing away the heat the body generates, convection creates the *sensation* of being colder than it actually is.

Since riding a motorcycle doesn't usually involve much physical activity, your body isn't doing much to generate its own heat. This means you have to do all you can to insulate the heat you do have, to prevent it from being whisked away by rushing air. If you protect yourself from the cold adequately with windproof warming layers and even heated gear, you can take huge steps toward making wind chill become almost not a factor at all.

Fighting wind chill comes down to two components: insulation layers to slow the rate at which body heat is lost, and wind proofing to prevent rushing air from stealing that heat away.

Tips to avoid hypothermia while riding a motorcycle

Understand the risk

Hypothermia is especially dangerous on a motorcycle, since it greatly diminishes mental and physical riding skills. It's important to realize the decline in your ability to ride safely begins early in the process. Knowing when to call it quits is of the utmost importance.

When your core temperature reaches 95 degrees Fahrenheit, you're hypothermic. Your body will begin to shiver to generate heat, and you'll likely be unable to do much of anything. As your core temp drops beyond that you'll encounter muscle stiffness, followed by involuntary contractions, and confusion. Being aware of these symptoms is the first step to preventing them. Being a "tough guy" (or gal) is all too often associated with motorcycling, but being cold can kill you, so putting aside these attitudes in exchange for some basic knowledge could very well save your hide.

Symptoms of hypothermia include:

- Uncontrollable shivering
- Numbness
- Weakness
- Loss of fine motor skills
- Mental confusion
- Loss of consciousness

Layer exterior garments.

It's best to wear a full coverage jacket and pant combo or suit that's water and wind proof. Wear gauntlet-style gloves that fit over your jacket. Choose boots that are also wind and waterproof. Make sure they're above the ankle and that they're not too tight, which can reduce circulation and make your feet colder. If you ride often in cold weather, you may want to invest in some of the electric gear available for vests, jackets, pants and gloves.

Play it safe.

Ride only when the temperatures allow you to stay warm with the gear you wear. Make sure no skin is exposed, or it will be at risk of frostbite. If you start to feel like you are being pricked by needles, it's time to get off your bike and warm up. Make it a rule to pull over and take a break whenever you start to feel cold or sluggish, or if you start to shiver. Have a warm beverage and a snack or meal. A short walk can also help warm you up.

Stay hydrated and fed.

Cold, dry air can draw moisture from your body so drink lots of water. Make sure you don't skip any meals before you ride. Your body generates heat as you digest which will help you keep warm. Drinking room-temperature water will allow your body to process the H₂O faster, hydrating you sooner.

Tips to stay warm

During cold weather, the goal is to preserve your body's core temperature. A key factor in doing this is not exposing your skin to the cold airstream. Here are some things to keep in mind when riding in cold weather:

- Always pack extra cold-weather gear.
- Plan to ride reasonable distances—remember the temperature drops quickly after sunset.
- Know the area's weather forecast before you ride.
- Dress in layers so you can adjust as temperatures change.
- If you sweat in your gear, you will chill faster.
- Layering your rain gear on top can help block the wind.
- Avoid tight-fitting combinations of riding gear.
- Wear a full-face helmet.
- Wear insulated, full-finger gloves.
- Use electric riding gear—there are many options available.
- Consider installing a windshield if your motorcycle doesn't already have one.
- A handlebar-mounted thermometer can help you stay aware of the actual air temperature.
- Make frequent stops to get out of the cold and warm up.
- Fuel your body—eat a hot meal and drink warm non-alcoholic beverages during rest stops.
- Remember to check on your co-rider. They get cold, too.



EVER WONDER WHAT THE TEMPERATURE IS AT RIDING SPEEDS...

RIDING SPEED (mph)	AIR TEMPERATURE (Degrees F)														
	30	35	40	45	50	60	55	65	70	75	80	85	90	95	100
5	27	32	37	43	48	58	53	64	69	74	79	85	90	95	100
10	16	22	28	34	40	53	47	59	65	71	77	84	90	96	102
15	9	15	22	29	36	49	42	56	63	69	76	83	90	96	103
20	4	11	18	25	32	47	39	54	61	68	75	82	89	97	104
25	0	8	15	22	30	45	37	52	60	67	74	82	89	97	104
30	-3	5	13	20	28	43	36	51	59	66	74	82	89	97	105
35	-5	3	11	19	27	42	35	50	58	66	74	81	89	97	105
40	-6	2	10	18	26	42	34	50	57	65	73	81	89	97	105
45	-7	1	9	17	25	41	33	49	57	65	73	81	89	97	105
50	-7	1	9	17	25	41	33	49	57	65	73	81	89	97	105
55	-8	0	9	17	25	41	33	49	57	65	73	81	89	97	105
60	-8	1	9	17	25	41	33	49	57	65	73	81	89	97	105
65	-9	1	9	17	25	41	33	49	57	65	73	81	89	97	105