

Fighting Fatigue on Long Motorcycle Rides

By Brad Kitchen (SUHOG)

Motorcycling is more physically demanding than driving a car and exposes you to the environment, which can lead to fatigue. To avoid becoming tired on long motorcycle rides, you need to get adequate rest, plan and prepare, and consume the right food and drink.

Experts say that fatigue contributes to between a fifth and a sixth of all vehicle accidents. That may not be true in motorcycle accidents across the board, but fatigue is definitely an issue for riders on trips of three days or more. It's something that you need to consider and prepare for. If you are riding with other people, it is an issue that you discuss and accommodate as you plan your trip. Different riders will have different requirements for rest, and if the trip is to be a safe one, all members of the group should be willing to accommodate each other.

Before you head out on the highway looking for adventure, consider a few steps that you can take and plans you can make to avoid having one of your adventures involve falling asleep or becoming complacent while riding. Ahhhhh, complacent!!! Just because you're on your bike, riding down a road with no traffic, doesn't mean you can let your guard down and relax. Doing the same thing over and over again until you don't think about it is when you become complacent. Don't let this happen to you. Becoming complacent injures thousands of riders each year. Some riders can tolerate 450 miles a day while others might be limited to 200 miles a day. Only you as a rider know what your capabilities are.

Rest

Adequate sleep can be a bit hard to come by before and during a multi-day ride. I am always thinking of things I want to do or remember to bring as I try to get to sleep on the night before I depart. I also have trouble getting to sleep while traveling. Sleeping in motels always seems to keep one eye open and an ear to the wall at night. Many people also have trouble getting a full night's sleep as they get older. If I combine that with early departures, I quickly have a sleep deficit. For that reason, I like to plan to allow myself to sleep late every two or three days, setting no departure time.

Don't use excessive amounts of alcohol as a sleep aid; it actually tends to reduce both the quantity and quality of sleep. You might think that you can't fall asleep on a motorcycle, but I have known riders who simply fell asleep while riding, waking up as they bounced through a ditch — or in the hospital. Riders who experienced these sorts of adventures often said they didn't even realize they were tired.

Experts say that you'll have "tired times" during every 12-hour cycle, most often between 3:00 and 5:00 (a.m. and p.m.). You may want to plan to arrive by that point or stop for an early dinner. If you can or need to, take a day off just to relax and catch up on your sleep.

Physical Preparation

Unless you ride your motorcycle almost every day or take rides of three hours or more almost every weekend, you may not be completely adapted to your bike. After a full day or two of riding, you will become acutely aware of muscles that you are using full-time to ride. You may be able to overcome some of this discomfort by **properly setting up your bike** and fitting components, such as a good aftermarket saddle, that make it more comfortable. However, you also need to give your body a chance to adapt. Taking breaks every hour or two, especially during the first few days of a long ride, will help this adjustment.

The climates

Extended exposure to wind and sun dehydrates and fatigues you much more than your routine two-hour weekend jaunt. Riding in a tank top and open-face helmet may seem like the best way to deal with the heat, but will actually wear you out and heat you up much faster than if you wear a vented or mesh jacket and a helmet that protects your face from the wind. Perspiration gets a chance to stay on and cool your skin if the wind flow is reduced but not eliminated. You will sharply reduce sunburn and windburn and their fatiguing effects by covering yourself fully. A windshield also reduces the amount of wind that's tearing at you but leaves enough to cool you. In our Southern Region where the temperatures can be high, drinking plenty of water will keep you from becoming dehydrated. Last summer I can recall two motorcycle accidents that occurred in our area due to rider fatigue and dehydration. Dizziness, confusion, and a lack of body motor skills can become major obstacles when dehydration occurs. Remember to drink plenty of water.

Quiet

Some of us who like loud pipes will disagree with my next statement. Wind noise (and exhaust noise if you have loud pipes) will not only permanently damage your hearing, it will fatigue you. Both noise sources are at their worst if you don't wear a helmet, but even a full-face helmet that seals your ears won't attenuate these noise sources sufficiently on an extended ride, so you should wear earplugs as well. If nothing else, you'll appreciate them when you try to go to sleep at night and the roaring in your ears isn't as loud. A windshield can also reduce wind noise.

Clear

Vision clarity can be an issue on extended rides too. A windshield with a significant distortion in the top of its windshield can affect fatigue. I have spoken to several riders throughout the years that said riding with a distorted windshield made them feel disoriented or tired or gave them headaches. If your windshield creates this problem, or if you have a face shield or sunglasses that are optically imperfect, you should find a replacement or eliminate the problem, perhaps by trimming the top of your windshield. If your vision has changed so that your prescription is no longer adequate, update it before you leave.

Caffeine and Alcohol

A coffee or cola can briefly boost your alertness, but isn't a substitute for adequate rest. As you keep reading this article of mine, there's a topic that some riders may not agree with me on. Even though I love my coffee and I've been known to have a beer or two in the evenings while winding down from a day of riding, waking up in the morning with alcohol fatigue is not good riding practices for the rider nor the group. When riding in groups, one must consider the safety of all riders. As a pilot for many years we have a regulation that says, "8 hours between bottle and throttle". This may not be enough time if you have purchased stock in Jack Daniels the night before but it's a bench mark.

Good Habits

Those boring admonitions about diet and exercise also apply to fighting fatigue. They increase your energy level, which makes you stronger and more alert. Make it a point to stretch and exercise when you stop for a break. As stated above, drinking adequate water is important too, especially considering that you are being dehydrated more rapidly because of your exposure to the wind. There's a theory, if you aren't drinking enough fluids in the summer to stop and urinate every hour, then your not consuming enough fluids.

Fighting fatigue provides benefits that go beyond safety. If you are alert and refreshed, the ride itself is more enjoyable, and you'll get more out of the sights and experiences that you came to enjoy.

With all of this being said, remember, "SAFETY FIRST".