

COMMUTE SEATTLE



LIVE MORE. DRIVE LESS.

Winter Bike Seminar: Mastering the Winter Commute

Bicycle commuting is a fun, easy, and affordable way to travel and with the proper knowledge and gear can be done all year long. Below are some helpful clothing and safety tips to remember when biking in the winter.*

Lights and Reflectors

Bicycle lights help you see where you are going and help others see you. Reflectors and light colored clothing can also help make you stand out against a dark background.

- Have working lights and reflectors on your bicycle.
 - Washington State requires bicycles to have a white light in front (visible at 500 feet) and a red light in back
- Wear light colored and/or reflective clothing

Types of Lights:

- **Headlights:** basic, non-rechargeable lights will help you see, be seen and also meet legal requirements. Headlights can range drastically in power, endurance, weight and price and begin around \$25.
- **White Strobe Lights:** strobes are brighter and more visible than headlights, but alone don't meet legal requirements.
- **Flashers:** flashers can be mounted on your bike, rear rack or on clothes or packs.
- **Reflectors:** available as vests, straps, tape and plastic pieces that mount to bicycles. Clear (white) reflectors return twice as much light as amber ones and more than three times as much as red ones.

Clothing for Commuting

Stay Cool: Cycling generates a lot of heat so clothes that are warm and comfortable have to control the buildup of heat and moisture as well as insulate and protect from wind. Multiple light layers with neck zippers let you adjust your ventilation as you ride.

- Your base layer (against your skin) and mid-layers should be synthetics or wool. Cotton in these layers will feel wetter and colder than the above materials. No T-shirts!
- If you feel warm as you start out then you're probably overdressed for any ride longer than a half hour.

Stay Dry: Your outer layer on top and bottom should have a windproof front and breathable sides and rear. Carry an extra clothes layer such as a windshell, rain pants, insulated jacket, or something to keep you warmer if it starts to rain during your ride.

- **Gore-Tex:** Gore-Tex can clog with ice at below-freezing temperatures. As windproof front materials these fabrics are acceptable but unnecessarily expensive. On the sides and back of your riding clothes they'll trap moisture and freeze you.

Stay Protected: Carry a headband, hat and facemask and try them in different combinations to protect yourself from wind and cold air. Your face, head and neck will need different amounts of protection as conditions vary. Uncovering your head is usually the simplest way to dump heat.

You may need to change the sizing pads in your helmet or remove them entirely to fit your winter headgear. Some hats are made specifically to fit under helmets. Try taping over the vents in your helmet if your head gets too cold.

- **Disposable heat packs** can be part of your normal system or can be carried for emergencies. They come in hand and foot varieties and last for 2-5 hours, depending on conditions. The reusable types are heavy and bulky and less effective.
- **Eye Protection** is very helpful if you're riding in a headwind or falling snow
- **Gloves** are extremely important when riding in colder temperatures. Wool knit gloves stay warm when wet and you can even wear a waterproof pair over them to stay dryer.

Winter Bike Gear

Fenders: Fenders help keep road spray off you while riding and can help keep a lot of road grit off of your bike as well. Many bike shops can help outfit your bike with fenders or you can even make some yourself.

Tires: Flat tires are no fun anytime but they can be really miserable in the rain. Always carry a spare tire or patch kit, tools to change a tire, and a small pump or cartridge to refill after fixing a flat. Cover your tools with tape so you don't have to touch cold metal directly when doing emergency repairs.

You can also decrease your chances of punctures by using a few innovative products:

- **Mister Tuffies:** thick plastic belts that you place between the tire and the inner tube
- **Tire-Saver:** a small, flexible wire that rides just above the surface of the tire and theoretically skims the nasty things away before they have a chance to penetrate the tire.
- **Self-Healing Slime Tubes:** Slime tubes still puncture but they are filled with a liquid goo that can seal small punctures.

Brake pads, Rims and Disk Brakes: The time required to stop greatly increases when riding in the rain, but good brake pads can make a big difference in stopping. Rain and road grit can wear away your brake pads and your rims at an alarming rate so make sure to check their durability often. If you feel a pulsing sensation while stopping, your rims may have thinned to a dangerous level and need to be replaced right away.

Lubrication: Rain and road grit puts a lot of wear on your bike, but cleaning your bike regularly and properly greasing your gears help keep your bike in great shape. In colder temperature, special low temperature grease can be used to make bikes easier to pedal and steer and allow less dirt and water build up.

Riding Techniques

Pedaling: Try to pedal smoothly and relax your upper body, especially on ice and soft snow. If your bike starts to slip or goes sideways, make small corrections rather than oversteering and weaving down the trail. Practice riding in a straight line when the trail is good so it's easier under bad conditions.

Watch For Ice: Road ice can provide lots of traction or very little. Learn how the different types look and sound. Try not to brake hard on the slippery sort, or if you must, use only your rear brake. Watch for dry patches where you can do your braking or turning.

Miscellaneous

- Be careful with glasses, watches, jewelry and zipper pulls. Small metal and plastic objects can get cold enough to cause frostbite.
- Carry emergency food in your tool bag so it's always on the bike. Energy food, like a Powerbar, works well.
- If your feet get cold, run with the bike.
- It's easy to get dehydrated while bicycling, especially in the winter. Dehydration causes decreased blood volume which makes us more susceptible to hypothermia and frostbite. It's important to drink water frequently if you're riding for more than one hour.
- Below zero, cycling speeds generate enough windchill to freeze exposed skin quickly. If parts of your face feel cold or numb, stop and warm them before they get frostbitten. If you're riding with others, watch each others' faces for white spots.
- Watch out for man-hole covers, railroad tracks, metal bridge decks, painted fog lines and leaves. All these things can be very slippery when wet.

Remember that everyone's visibility is lowered in the rain. Even in the daylight, turn your lights on. When it's wet, slow down.

Use your judgment as to what you need to make your winter riding more enjoyable!