

EMERGENCY STOP

Going fast is easy, just roll the twist grip. But what goes fast must eventually slow down, and braking effectively can be a bit of a challenge. Here's how to get it right...

Experienced riders sometimes talk about 'roadcraft', a set of skills that enables them to read the road and traffic around them, and use that information to avoid getting into situations where emergency manoeuvres are needed. But no matter how experienced you are, a situation where you need to react quickly can happen to the best of us, usually when you least expect it, and very, very suddenly. In a situation like that you need to be equipped with skills to deal with it quickly and effectively. One key skill in such situations is emergency braking.

The bad news is that there is a high chance that you will have to perform an emergency stop at some point in your riding life (that's why it's included in the licence test, after all). The good news is that like most motorcycling manoeuvres, with a bit of practice you can learn to do it effectively.



Common mistakes

One size does not fit all, and although the same laws of physics apply to all bikes, different geometry, equipment and load mean that you may need to adjust the approach slightly depending on what you ride. For instance, a sportsbike with top-spec brakes, a solo rider and no luggage will stop pretty quickly on the front brake alone (possibly so well that the rear wheel is barely in contact with the ground, making the rear brake pretty useless), whereas a fully-loaded cruiser with a passenger can benefit from using the front and rear brake together.

If you are used to driving a car but new to bikes, it may be difficult to get out of the habit of stomping on the brake pedal when you spot a hazard. In a car this is fine as the four wheels will keep you upright in most situations, but bikes are much less stable, and your braking actions need to be more gradual and progressive rather than an instant grab of the front brake lever or stomp on the rear brake.

Many riders underestimate how quickly their bikes can stop safely. If you apply the pressure to the brakes correctly, you might be surprised to see how quickly modern bikes can stop. The important

thing here is that you need to do the braking right, in a controlled manner. At the same time, you should never over-estimate the bike's or your own ability as this can lead to obvious problems.

How to get it right

One sure way to improve your braking is practice. The more you repeat the process, the shorter the braking distance becomes. Also you will feel much more confident in your own abilities and bike's capabilities, which helps you keep your cool when the skills are called into action.

When it comes to braking, it's not all about the bike, it's also about you. Your riding position has a significant impact on how well you can slow the bike down. It's a natural instinct to sit up, straighten your arms and grab hard on the handlebars when you are braking. Unfortunately, this makes the whole thing more difficult and destabilises the bike. What you should do instead is anchor yourself to the bike by gripping the fuel tank with your knees. This makes the weight transfer lower, and lets you hold the handlebars with relaxed arms, giving you much more control

without pushing the front wheel in a direction it doesn't want to go.

Same as when riding at speed, when you are reducing speed it matters where you are looking. Looking further ahead and lifting your vision from the front wheel will give you a better idea of your surroundings and help balance the bike. Applying the brakes needs to happen quickly, progressively and smoothly. With most bikes, this is mainly done with the front brake, but it's best to experiment with your bike when you practice, so you know exactly what works.

When you apply the front brake, do it smoothly, so the front suspension compresses in a controlled way to add pressure and stability to the front wheel. A really good technique is:

- Throttle Off
- Little bit of front brake
- Little bit of back brake
- Then load more, more, more on the front
- Clutch in

With the suspension compressed you can then brake harder. You might be surprised how hard you can brake on a modern motorcycle, and don't be surprised if the rear wheel feels light or even lifts a little.

In most cases the rear brake will have much less impact than the front, and it may be better to leave it alone, but if you have a lot of weight at the rear of the bike (pillion, luggage) or if the front brake is not very effective, then it will be helpful.

Many new bikes have ABS systems which will help not to lock the wheels when you are braking. If your bike has different levels of ABS to choose from it is important to set these correctly, remembering to allow for the conditions and the load carried. The only way to get this right is, you guessed it, is practice.

In addition to the brake, you will also need to remember to shift down the gears so that you are ready to ride off after you have come to a standstill, and pull the clutch lever in to stop the bike from stalling as the speed reduces.

And don't forget. Braking hard in a straight line is one thing, but when you are riding round a bend, with the bike leant over, you are dealing with a different situation altogether. Braking in a corner is another useful skill, and we will be looking at how to do that in a future article. But first, let's get that straight-line braking sorted.

OUR EXPERT

Chris White, Phoenix Motorcycle Training, Gillingham

Chris White became a part-time instructor in 1997 and a full-time DAS instructor in 2003. He has run his own motorcycle training school for nine years and worked for Phoenix for over two years. Chris is an advanced rider, having attained a HoSPA gold pass three times, achieved an IAM test pass, and completed four Bike Safe courses.

PHOENIX MOTORCYCLE TRAINING

Phoenix Motorcycle Training is the UK's largest motorcycle training provider, with 22 local training centres. The company provides high-quality courses delivered by fully-accredited instructors, and is designed to meet a range of customer needs, from complete beginners to experienced riders.

0330 223 4000 / www.phoenixmotorcycletraining.co.uk