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Bicycle Laws

As with traffic laws in general, bicycle laws are enforced at the state and local levels. But while bicyclists generally are expected to follow the same traffic laws that apply to motorists, most jurisdictions also have laws that are specific to those operating bicycles on public thoroughfares. State laws and local ordinances also typically include bicycle helmet provisions, rules against riding a bike on the sidewalk, [biking while under the influence](#) and other bicycle-specific rules.

Some local bicycle ordinances have been criticized for making bikers (and pedestrians) less safe, such as requirements that bicyclists ride on the sidewalk or walk their bikes across intersections. Since bicycle laws can be different from one municipality to another, and not always intuitive, bicyclists should familiarize themselves with laws along regularly traveled routes.

Traffic violations incurred while riding a bicycle are handled just the same as for a moving violation involving an automobile. The ticket should indicate whether the violation involved a bicycle and will not affect your automobile insurance.

Common Bicycle Traffic Rules

Signaling

While some bicycles are equipped with turn signals, bicyclists are required to use the proper hand signals when turning, changing lanes or stopping. Failure to signal while biking in traffic can result in a traffic citation:

- Right Turn / Lane Change: Right hand extended straight out
- Left Turn / Lane Change: Right hand bent upward 90 degrees at the elbow
- Stop: Right hand bent downward 90 degrees at the elbow

Helmet Laws

Most states and the District of Columbia require the use of bicycle helmets to some degree, often for children under the age of 16 or 18. And while there are no state laws requiring helmets for bicyclists all ages, many local ordinances do. Washington state, for example, has no state law addressing the use of helmets at all but many of its cities (including Seattle) require bicyclists of all ages to wear helmets.

Lights and Reflectors

In virtually every state, bicyclists are required to have red lights on the back and white lights on the front, as well as white reflectors on the front and red reflectors on the back. Details vary with respect to individual state and local laws.

Riding on Sidewalks

Most state and local ordinances prohibit bicyclists over a certain age (13 in San Francisco, for example) from biking on sidewalks, although bikers must always yield to pedestrians. However, some local ordinances allow bicycling on sidewalks and even prohibit bikes on certain streets.

Running a Stop Sign or Stoplight

As with motorists, bicyclists may not ride through a stop sign or stoplight without stopping completely first. Bikes move slowly (compared to automobiles) and so it may not seem practical to come to a complete stop--especially if stopping uphill--but failing to do so could result in a citation.

State Bicycle Laws

The California Vehicle Code Section addressing bicycles states that anyone riding a bicycle on public streets or highways "has all the rights and is subject to all the provisions applicable to the driver of a vehicle." But the state also requires bicyclists to use properly spaced handlebars, use reflectors and lights when biking after dark, refrain from carrying packages while biking (unless at least one hand is on the handlebar) and wear helmets if under the age of 18.

Whether or not bicycling under the influence of alcohol or drugs is illegal largely depends on a given state's definition of "vehicle." Some states limit drunk driving laws to *motorized* vehicles, while others (Florida, for example) include bicycles and other non-motorized modes of transportation.

Links to bicycle-specific laws for select U.S. states are provided below:

- [California](#)
- [Colorado](#)
- [Illinois](#)
- [Florida](#)
- [Massachusetts](#)
- [New York](#)
- [Texas](#)
- [Washington](#)

Keep in mind that bicycle laws often are mandated by local ordinances as well.

See "[Bicycle Accidents](#)" for information about liability, negligence and other information related to bike accidents.

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