

COLD WEATHER BIKE RIDING

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How to Stay Warm on Your Bike in the Winter

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When the temperatures begin to drop, I must admit that I tend to head indoors to ride. Much below 40 degrees and I have too many problems with riding as I get older. Though when I was younger, and for special rides, like the New Year's Polar Bear Rides, I love to get out ride, no matter what the weather.

However, when riding outdoors in colder weather, there are some things to keep in mind as you ride. As with any extreme of temperature, you must be prepared. Here are some handy tips for you cold weather enthusiasts.

Know Your Physical Limits

No matter how much you love to ride outdoors, there are some times when it simply is not in your best interests. If you suffer from asthma, recent respiratory problems, or other medical conditions that require you to avoid extreme temperatures, be mindful of these warnings. This also includes people who experience pain, shortness of breath or tightness in the chest while riding in the cold. Some of this may be normal but should not occur if you use proper precautions like covering your mouth with special clothing.

Clothing

The two main things you need to know about dressing from the weather come straight from your mother's mouth: Use layers and stay dry! Using layers will help you in staying warm and preserve your body heat, this include a hat because your head is where you lose most of your body heat. There are special hats that fit under helmets, don't force your snow hat in there or forego the helmet. The next point is to stay dry, which will also prevent loss of body heat. There are special materials available to help you, but simple things like wool and your regular rain gear might be all you need.

Watch the Road

When the weather is cold, you may be tempted to keep your head down and out of bitter winds. This is a very serious safety hazard. You need to be seen as far away as possible. This might mean that you want to invest in reflective gear for you and/or your bike. A step up from that would be lights for your bike. Bicycles don't require major lighting systems, but blinking lights on the front and rear of your bike can help save your life. Remember the days get shorter as it gets colder, which means you are more likely to run into darkness, this is particularly true if you're commuting.

Another road hazard is true for any time of the year, but can be particularly dangerous during cold weather. Problems like icy roads and snow can make for a more slippery ride. This means that, as in any vehicle, you need to pay attention to traffic, give yourself plenty of stopping room and avoid problem areas when possible. Avoid piles of debris like leaves and snow piles. Stick to roads that are salted. Watch out for sewer covers and grates, as they can be more slippery in inclement weather.

If you decide that riding in the cold is your cup of tea, remember to follow these simple strategies for staying safe and warm.

Head

45° - 60°F: If you are lucky enough to have a full set of hair, you might be able to get away with just your helmet. Some people like to wear a cycling cap, but please wear a helmet, too. A skull cap might fit under your helmet better and will keep you pretty warm as the temperature falls. Earbands are a plus if the wind is getting to be too much.

Below 45°F: You need to protect your face from the wind and you need keep from losing heat from your head. I like to wear a balaclava to make up for my lack of hair. Make sure you buy one that is made from something very thin - polyester/Lycra so that your helmet can still fit. Hair endowed riders can try a face mask instead.

Upper Body

45° - 60°F: Add arm warmers and a t-shirt under your jersey to your usual summer setup. If it warms up, peel off the arm warmers and throw them in your jersey pocket.

Below 45°F: Wear an undershirt made of wicking material next to the skin (polypropylene, or other appropriate material). Over that, a long sleeve jersey, then a windproof jacket. Make sure you get cycling specific clothing, or that jacket is going to expose your "crack" to the elements when you're bent over in a riding position.

Legs and Feet

45° - 60°F: Over your shorts, wear cycling tights. Just regular Lycra tights will do. As an alternative, get leg warmers that you can peel off if the weather improves. Look for little touches, such as windproof panels over the knees and a contoured shape. Wear neoprene booties if it's under 50°F. Insulated socks can be used instead, but be careful with ill-fitting socks that will bunch up and give you blisters.

Below 45°F: Insulated cycling tights will keep you warm. Make sure they are windproof in the front and crotch. Commuters like having wind and waterproof pants, but be careful of getting baggy pants caught in the chainrings. (Easy solution - get a reflective band to go around your right ankle.) Again, wear those booties! And wear socks that are long enough not to leave any skin under the bottom of your tights exposed.

Hands

45° - 60°F: Glove liners under regular cycling gloves will do the trick.

Below 45°F: Insulated, full-fingered cycling gloves are what you need. Mittens and "two-fingered" gloves may be warmer, but keeping control of your bike should be a priority. Look for gloves that are windproof, waterproof, and breathable. Remember, you never know when a snowball fight will break out on the ride!