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Bicycling, Walking Yield Health Benefits When Done Safely

By Melanie Reynolds

Public health professionals are keen advocates of bicycling and walking because they're fun, inexpensive, and effective ways of adding more physical activity to your day.

As we all know, any way we can increase our activity level pays huge dividends in terms of health. Regular physical activity reduces our risk for many chronic diseases, like cancer, heart disease, and diabetes. It also can help keep bones strong, regulate weight, improve sleep, reduce stress, and prevent depression.

Health officials recommend that adults get 30 minutes of moderate-intensity aerobic activity 5 days a week. Children should get 60 minutes a day. By walking briskly or biking to work, school, or to do errands, you can kill two birds with one stone: you can log some of those minutes and get where you need to go, too.

But in a culture where motor vehicles still rule the road, we need to educate ourselves about walking and bicycling safely, so we can stick around to reap those long-term health benefits.

Like a Helena resident said recently in a letter to the Independent Record on bicycling safety, you don't want to become a hood ornament!

Pedestrian Safety

Pedestrians are the most vulnerable users of our streets and roads, so take steps to be safe when you walk on or along roadways. This includes using extra caution at intersections and crosswalks and increasing your visibility at night by wearing reflective clothing and carrying a flashlight.

On average, 43 Montana pedestrians are hospitalized and 13 die each year following a collision with a motor vehicle on a public road. In 2011, Montana ranked 16th among states for its rate of pedestrian fatalities, according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration. That compares to a state ranking of 40th in 2010.

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Children and elderly people are at the highest risk of injury or death from traffic crashes. The rate of pedestrian deaths generally increases with age. Children are especially vulnerable because of their small size, inability to judge distances and speeds, and lack of experience with traffic rules.

Here are some pedestrian-safety tips to keep in mind next time you hit the pavement:

- By law, pedestrians have the right of way at intersections uncontrolled by traffic signals – whether there’s a marked crosswalk or not. Vehicles, including bicycles, must slow down or stop to let you cross.
- Pedestrians do need to yield to emergency vehicles at intersections.
- Where sidewalks are provided, you must not walk along or on an adjacent roadway.
- Where sidewalks aren’t provided, you may walk on the shoulder of the road. It’s safest to walk facing traffic.
- Don’t go around or under a barrier at a railroad crossing while the barrier is closed or is being opened or closed.

Remember, no matter what the law says, as a pedestrian you’re unlikely to win a confrontation with a 2-ton vehicle. Ultimately, your safety is your responsibility.

To learn more about pedestrian safety, visit www.cdc.gov/features/pedestriansafety or www.walkinginfo.org

Bicycling Safety

On average, 10 cyclists are hospitalized and 2 die each year as a result of a collision with a motor vehicle on a public road in Montana.

Under state law, a bicycle is considered a vehicle. That means motorists and bicyclists have the same rights and responsibilities. Bicyclists must obey the same traffic laws that apply to motorists. This means you must:

- Stop at stop signs and red lights.
- Obey all traffic signs.
- Ride with traffic in the appropriate lane. Riding against traffic is illegal as well as dangerous.
- Use a headlight and rear reflector at night.
- Yield to pedestrians at marked and unmarked intersections.
- Signal your turns (hold your left arm straight out for a left turn; hold your right arm straight out for a right turn, or bend your left arm upward at the elbow).
- Avoid talking or texting on a cell phone while riding.
- In most cases, ride single-file. You may ride two abreast if you’re riding on a paved shoulder, in a parking lane, or on a road with two or more lanes in your direction.
- If you approach an intersection with a right-turn lane and intend to continue straight, ride in the through lane.

Some other measures you can take to protect yourself are:

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- Wear a helmet to protect your head (and brain!).
- Ride predictably; don't weave in and out of traffic or around cars.
- Make eye contact with motorists to make sure they see you.
- Watch for drivers in parked cars who may be about to open the car door.

Motorists must yield to bicyclists just as they would to another vehicle. Bicyclists, like any other vehicles, must yield to pedestrians – including when cycling on sidewalks.

All of us should use courtesy and common sense to protect the safety and well being of ourselves and others in our community.

For more information on bicycling safety, visit www.bikewalkhelena.org/safety-tips/

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