

# Tennessee Traffic Laws Relating to Bicycles

A HANDBOOK FOR MOTORISTS & BICYCLISTS



For more information on TDOT's Bicycle and  
Pedestrian Program, please visit our website at

<http://www.tdot.state.tn.us/bikeped>

\*Special thanks to Knoxville Regional TPO for permission to use content



Tennessee Department of Transportation. Authorization  
No. 401509, Online Only, January 2013. This public  
document was promulgated at a cost of \$0.00 per copy.

The Tennessee Department of Transportation



## REFERENCES

- Tennessee Code, [www.lexisnexis.com/hottopics/tncode](http://www.lexisnexis.com/hottopics/tncode) (all citations in this document are from the Tennessee Code, as of December 2012)
- Florida Bicycle Law Enforcement Guide, June 2004



Although it is legal, bicycling on sidewalks is not recommended except for young children. Motorists are not looking for or expecting bicyclists on a sidewalk, which creates dangerous situations every time the bicyclist crosses a driveway or intersection. Many people assume riding on sidewalks is safer than on the road, but studies show that assumption to be false.

#### • Traffic Signals

At some signalized intersections, an electrical circuit with loops embedded in the pavement is used to detect vehicles waiting for a green light. The light will not turn green until the sensor detects metal, indicating the presence of a vehicle. Some sensors are not sensitive enough to detect the metal in a bicycle, and some bicycles are made of carbon fiber and do not contain enough metal to be detected. The most sensitive position for a bicycle to be detected is directly over the pavement cut. An unresponsive loop should be reported to the local traffic engineering office. Tennessee state law has made it legal for motorcycles and bicycles to stop and proceed through a red light if the sensor does not detect them.

#### • Aggressive Driving/Harassment

A few motorists verbally threaten bicyclists, or even throw objects at them. Bicyclists are often not clear on what to do in this situation. If you are physically threatened by a driver or passenger's actions, note the license plate number and a description of the vehicle and the harasser, and call the appropriate law enforcement agency as soon as possible.

#### • Assault

Every driver of a vehicle must exercise due care by operating the vehicle at a safe speed, by maintaining a safe lookout, by keeping the vehicle under control, and by devoting full time and attention to operating the vehicle. Failure to overtake and pass a bicyclist safely is a violation of due care. If the violation results in serious bodily injury of another, it is a Class B misdemeanor punishable by a fine of \$250. If the violation results in the death of another, it is a class A misdemeanor punishable by a fine of \$500 and up to a year in jail time (55-8-197).

If the driver or passenger assaults you with an object, that would be simple assault. If they use the vehicle to try to run you off the road or hit you, that is considered aggravated assault because the vehicle is a weapon.

## Introduction

Traffic rules exist to improve everyone's safety and are based on collective experience. Most crashes can be avoided if both bicyclists and motorists follow the rules of the road.

The Tennessee Department of Transportation reminds both motorists and bicyclists to remember a few things when out on the roads.

### MOTORISTS

Individual drivers can make the roads safer by driving at reasonable speeds, expecting and slowing for bicyclists and pedestrians, and leaving plenty of room when passing. Remember that if bicyclists and pedestrians were not out walking and riding, they would probably be out *driving*, creating more traffic congestion!

#### When you pass a bicyclist on the street, remember:

- **Bicyclists are, by state law, drivers of vehicles.** Bicyclists have the same rights as other vehicle drivers to be on the road.
- **Giving 3 feet is the law in Tennessee**, but more than 3 feet is needed if speed limits are above 40 mph.
- If bicyclists squeeze over to the right, they endanger themselves. They end up facing debris on the road and bad storm drain grates. **Common sense and the law allow bicyclists to ride as far to the left of such roadside hazards as needed for safety.**
- If the lane is too narrow for the motorist to safely pass the bicyclist within the lane, while still allowing the cyclist a safe buffer-distance from both roadside hazards and the passing vehicle, **the law allows the bicyclist to take the entire lane.** This means the motorist has to wait behind for a safe chance to pass. Remember that it is easier to pass a person on a bicycle than that same person driving an automobile.

## BICYCLISTS

For bicyclists, safety depends more on how you ride rather than where. Many studies show that bicyclists who practice “Vehicular Cycling,” following the rules of the road and using front and rear lights starting at dusk, are statistically as safe as motorists and up to twenty times safer than bicyclists who don’t follow road rules or use lights. Following these rules makes the streets safe for everyone:

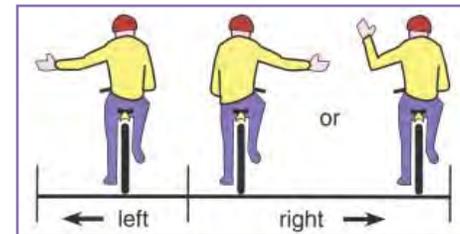
- **Stop and yield to cross traffic** before entering a road from a driveway or sidewalk. Stop at stop signs. Stop when you have the red at traffic signals. Remember, you are the driver of a vehicle and have the same rights AND responsibilities as motorists.
- **Be predictable and visible.** A bicyclist should ride to the right so that other vehicles can pass, but the bicyclist should ride in a predictable straight line. Swerving left to avoid potholes, parked cars, broken glass and other hazards can surprise motorists who are attempting to pass. A bicyclist who stays too far to the right is less visible to drivers. Moving left when the lane is too narrow for a bicycle and another vehicle to share helps motorists who might otherwise misjudge passing space.
- **Ride with traffic.** A bicyclist who rides facing oncoming traffic increases his/her risk of being hit by a motorist. Drivers entering and exiting the roadway at side streets and driveways do not expect bicyclists to approach from the wrong direction.
- **Signal.** Use arm signals to communicate turning or merging movements to other drivers. If you communicate with motorists they will likely cooperate with you.
- **Wear a helmet.** Your helmet is a lot like a seat belt. Wear it all the time as “insurance,” but then drive so safely that you never need that insurance.
- **Lights on at dusk.** Use a white light on the front and we recommend a red light in the rear as well, whenever you ride at dusk or after dark. Reflectors are not enough. Motorists try to avoid hitting a cyclist they can see, but a bicycle without lights at night is nearly invisible. Headlights are not just used so that the bicyclist can see where he/she is going—the most important purpose of lights and reflectors is to let motorists know that the bicyclist is there.

Bicycling in cooperation with traffic and the law is an enjoyable experience with many health benefits.

## • Signals for Turns

Every driver who intends to start, stop or turn, or partly turn from a direct line, shall first see that such movement can be made in safety, and whenever the operation of any other vehicle may be affected by such movement, shall give a signal required in this section, plainly visible to the driver of such other vehicle of the intention to make such movement.

Whenever the signal is given by means of the hand and arm, the driver shall indicate the intention to start, stop, or turn, or partly turn, by extending the hand and arm from and beyond the left side of the vehicle, in the following manner:



- For left turn, or to pull to the left, the arm shall be extended in a horizontal position straight from and level with the shoulder;
- For right turn, or pull to the right, the arm shall be extended upward. *(You can also use your right arm, extended straight out. The law was written for drivers of motor vehicles, who cannot use their right arms for turn signals.)*
- For slowing down or to stop, the arm shall be extended downward (55-8-143)

## • Sidewalk Riding

While there is no state law that prohibits sidewalk riding, some local jurisdictions in Tennessee do have ordinances that prohibit bicycling on sidewalks, particularly in downtown business districts where pedestrian traffic is common. Where bicycling on sidewalks is allowed, bicyclists must yield to pedestrians and give audible warnings before passing pedestrians.

**• Bicycle Lamps and Brakes**



Every bicycle when used at night must be equipped with a front white headlight visible at a distance of 500 feet, and a red rear reflector visible at a distance of 50 feet. Bicycles must also be equipped with brakes that allow the bicyclist to stop within 25 feet at 10 mph on dry pavement (55-8-177).

**• Carrying Articles on Bicycles**

No bicyclist shall carry any package, bundle or article which prevents them from keeping at least one hand upon the handlebars (55-8-176).

**• No Passengers**

No one can ride a bicycle other than on a permanent seat. No bicycle shall be used to carry more persons than the number for which it is designed (55-8-173).

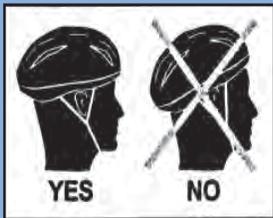
**• Clinging to Vehicles**

A bicyclist may not attach themselves or their bicycle to any other vehicle on a roadway (55-8-174).

**• Helmet Law and Child Bicycle Safety**

With regard to any bicycle operated on any highway, street or sidewalk, all bicyclists under the age of 16 must wear a protective bicycle helmet of good fit fastened securely upon the head with the straps of the helmet.

All passengers on bicycles must weigh less than 40 pounds or be less than 40 inches in height, and be properly seated in and adequately secured to a restraining seat (55-52-105).



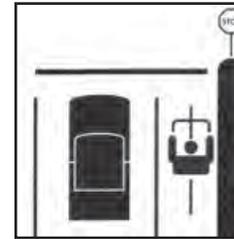
Bicycle helmets, properly fitted and secured, have been found effective at reducing the incidence and severity of head, brain and upper facial injuries. Head injuries account for about 30% of emergency room visits of injured bicyclists. We encourage anyone riding a bike to wear a helmet, no matter what age you are!

**Uniform Traffic Control Synopsis**

For purposes of reducing high-risk behaviors, the most important sections of the Tennessee Code Title 55 are indicated below.

**• Legal Status of Bicycles**

A bicycle is defined as a vehicle and bicyclists are subject to the same rights and responsibilities of other drivers, except those provisions which by their nature can have no application to bicyclists (55-8-101, 55-8-172).

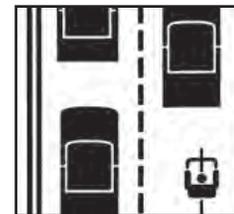


**• Obedience to Any Required Traffic-Control Device**

All drivers, including bicyclists, must obey all official traffic-control devices (55-8-109).

**• Driving on Right Side of Roadway**

Upon all roadways of sufficient width, a vehicle shall be driven upon the right half of the roadway, except:



- When passing another vehicle proceeding in the same direction (pass on the left)
- When the right half of a roadway is closed because of construction
- On a roadway divided into three marked lanes for traffic under the rules applicable thereon; or
- On a one-way street (55-8-115)

**• Paved Shoulders**

Since the definition of “roadway” excludes the shoulder (55-8-101), bicyclists are not required to ride on the shoulder, although they may prefer to do so. Shoulders are often filled with debris and broken glass, so they are not always good places to ride.

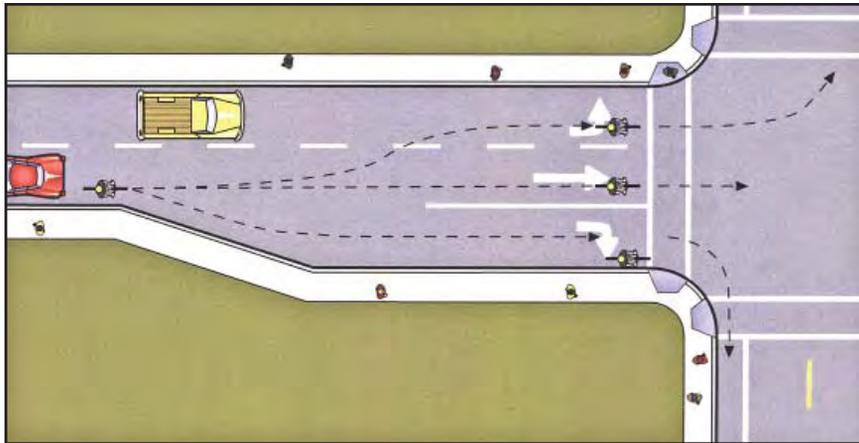
**• Passing**

The operator of a motor vehicle when overtaking and passing a bicycle proceeding in the same direction on the roadway, shall leave a safe distance between the motor vehicle and the bicycle of not less than three feet (3’) and shall maintain such clearance until safely past the overtaken bicycle.

Bicyclists must pass stopped or slower vehicles on the left, just as motorists do. Passing on the right is only allowed when the vehicle overtaken is making or about to make a left turn, on a road with unobstructed pavement not occupied by parked vehicles of sufficient width for two or more lines of moving vehicles in each direction; and on a one-way street where the roadway is free from obstructions and of sufficient width for two or more lines of moving vehicles. The driver of a vehicle may overtake and pass another vehicle upon the right only under conditions permitting such movement in safety. In no event shall such movement be made by driving off the pavement or main-traveled portion of the roadway (55-8-117, 55-8-118).

We recommend that bicyclists *not* pass cars on the right, though it may be tempting. Motorists may suddenly turn right into a driveway, or pull out in front of you because they see a line of stopped cars, not you.

### • Intersections and Turning Movements



**Right Turns.** The law specifies that both the approach to a right turn and the turn itself must be made “in the rightmost lane and as close as practicable to the curb or edge of road.” This is rarely a problem for bicyclists. However, motorists often fail to observe this rule. Passing a bicyclist and then immediately turning right is a violation of this rule. Drivers must pass at a safe distance to the left and not return to the right until safely passed.

Bicyclists intending to go straight ahead who overtake vehicles that are waiting to turn right are at high risk of collision. This is particularly a problem with trucks and buses that must necessarily begin the right turn from a distance away from the right curb. If the motorist is at the intersection first and is clearly indicating a right turn, it is the bicyclist who is at fault for passing on the right, since it is clearly unsafe to do so in such circumstances.

**Left Turns.** A bicyclist who cannot readily merge left in advance of turning left may turn at the next block or stop at the far side of the intersection, turn left and then proceed across the street after complying with right-of-way rules. But when operating normally on the roadway, bicyclists, like motorists, must move towards the middle of the road before turning left.

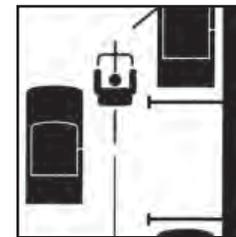
The bicyclist should turn left from the right side of a left-turn lane, or from the middle to left of a lane that also serves through traffic. Moving to the proper position for a left turn may require the bicyclist to begin moving left a block or more in advance of the turn, especially if there are several lanes to cross.

All drivers turning left must yield to traffic coming from the opposite direction. The duty to yield depends on who is turning and who is going straight, not they type of vehicle the operator is driving.

**Straight Through.** Drivers may have to change lane position in order to go straight through an intersection. If the right lane becomes a right-turn-only lane, bicyclists will need to merge left in order to go straight. If the rightmost lane permits both straight-through and right-turn movements, a bicyclist may merge towards the center of the lane to communicate to following motorists that the bicyclist does not intend to turn right, and to prevent the motorists from overtaking and turning at the same time. (55-8-140)

### • Road Position for Bicyclists

Bicyclists moving more slowly than other traffic should ride as close as practicable to the right-hand curb or edge of the roadway, except:



- When overtaking and passing another vehicle proceeding in the same direction;
- When preparing for a left turn at an intersection or into a private road or driveway; or
- When reasonably necessary to avoid conditions including, but not limited to, parked vehicles, animals, surface hazards, or a lane that is too narrow for a bicycle and another vehicle to travel safely side by side within the lane (55-8-175).

### • Riding Side-by-side

Bicyclists shall not ride more than two abreast, except on paths or parts of roadways set aside for the exclusive use of bicycles. Persons riding two abreast shall not impede the normal and reasonable movement of traffic and, on a laned roadway, shall ride within a single lane (55-8-175).