

Motorcycle Safety – Severe Weather

It is always a good idea to look at the weather maps from your favorite weather source before you set out on a long trip. However, as every meteorologist knows, weather is only so predictable. Over the years I have enjoyed riding along wonderful isolated, scenic country roads. Occasionally, out of the blue, a storm pops up. We look around and there is nowhere to go for shelter.

If you have an alternative route that you can take, you can try to outrun the storm if it is far in the distance. If you get caught, I have compiled information from NOAA (National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration), and FEMA (Federal Emergency Management Administration) to help you make decisions that could save your life.

Lightning – take it seriously!

80% of the people who are struck by lightning are male, between the ages of 15 – 40. The majority are struck on their way to seek shelter. Statistically, about 100 strikes hit the earth every second and about 2,000 people killed across the world every year.

No place outdoors is safe when lightning strikes. Find indoor shelter immediately if possible. Heat lightning is not harmless; it is lightning that is too far away to hear the thunder. One bolt can reach up to 5 miles, and originate as far as 10 miles away from the rain. To determine how far the storm is, count the seconds between the flash and the thunder, then divide by 5. The result will be the distance away in miles.

Contrary to popular belief, lightning is not attracted to metal objects, but metal is one of the best conductors! It is attracted to tall objects, so if something is tall and metal – steer clear. Rubber soled shoes and motorcycle tires will not protect you. If you are in a car with a hard roof, your tires can offer some help if you are not touching metal. Stay away from tall objects and isolated buildings that stand out.

If you cannot find shelter, go to a low spot in the terrain, preferably with many dense small trees or bushes. Avoid being the tallest object. Steer clear of water as it is also a good conductor. Leave your metal motorcycle on the side of the road. If you feel your hair stand on end, lightning is about to strike; quickly squat low to the ground on the balls of your feet. Place your hands over your ears and your head between your knees. Try to make yourself the smallest target possible with the least contact to the ground. Do NOT lie flat on the ground.

Tornadoes – take shelter immediately!

It is a good practice to carry a weather radio with you on your trips. A tornado watch does not mean that a tornado is imminent. A tornado warning means that one has been spotted and you should take immediate safety measures. Do NOT wait until you see a funnel as it may well be too late at that point, particularly if you are in an unfamiliar area. A dark greenish sky, a low wall cloud that may be rotating, large hail, and a loud roar like a freight train are all warning

signs to take cover immediately. Do NOT stop to take pictures or videos, as the delay can be deadly.

The United States has the highest incidence of tornadoes worldwide with more than 1000 per year. They can come in clusters, or one at a time. Touch down can be seconds, or as long as an hour; leaving a path from 50 yards to 1 mile, and traveling at speeds from 30 – 70 mph..

Rain is not required for a twister to form. They can be invisible until the funnel picks up dust or a cloud form, and can be hidden within heavy rain. Damage can occur without the funnel touching the ground as the tornadic circulation around it can reach to the land. Likewise, this circulation can cause damage before the funnel has formed. This natural destructor can cross water and go uphill, so there is no geological safe place. Taking shelter in an automobile is deadly, unless you have a clear roadway to out run the storm and even then this is your last and most dangerous option. Autos are flung and smashed. Stay far away from them (and your motorcycle) as they can become flying projectiles.

If you are near buildings, avoid places with wide span roofs like shopping malls, auditoriums, big box style stores, and wide hallways. If this is your only shelter option, go to the back of the store or the location with the most full height walls. Look for places like staff break rooms, toilet rooms, or walled offices. Stay away from large windows and roll-up doors as these can be destroyed quickly. Intersections and roads between tall buildings can create substantially increased wind force.

Sheltering under bridges or overpasses is a dangerous practice. They become wind tunnels and strengthen the already powerful winds. If the tornado passes over the top of the bridge, the wind underneath will change direction with great force as the vortex passes. Even if you had the strength, there is rarely anything to hang on to. Bridges can collapse and debris can be blasted underneath them. NOAA warns that sheltering under bridges in a vehicle is extremely dangerous. As the wind strength increases, the automobile can be picked up and thrown, other vehicles and debris can be thrown onto you, and everyone will be blocked from escape. Get out of the car, run to an open area away from the cars, and lay on the ground in a depression if possible.

Mobile homes, no matter how they are secured or where they are located, become death traps, and can be ripped up and tossed through the storm.

The safest place is an underground shelter or basement; go to the lowest floor that you can in a room without windows. Small rooms are better, as the vertical walls can help protect you from falling debris. If you have no room without windows, a closet will do. Opening windows in a building is hazardous and will not help. There is no basis for locating in the southwest corner; this is a myth.

If you are out on a remote country road without shelter, lie flat in a depression in the ground in an open area if possible. Cover your head with your hands. Do not cover your head with a loose jacket. There is no research to support keeping your helmet on for protection as strong winds

could catch the helmet and snap your head back. Watch out for flying debris which causes most of the fatalities and injuries. Be aware of the possibility of flooding.

After the danger has passed, be alert to possible downed power lines and debris of all kinds. Assume any downed power lines to be live and stay away. If the structure you have been sheltering in is damaged, get out and stay out until it can be evaluated for structural stability. Animals maybe confused, snakes may be forced out in the open from flooding.

It is not advisable to ride your motorcycle even if you think it is intact. There may be damage that is not apparent. Experiencing such a trauma can cause significant emotional upset and is NOT a good time to be on a motorcycle.