The bike stopped. Now what?

You're riding along, it's a beautiful day, your motorcycle is humming along beneath you.

Then all of the sudden, it's not. Maybe it popped or sputtered once, but the bottom line is: you're coasting to the side of the road.

"What'll I do now," you think.

Luckily that's where this story comes in. Here's a brief look at what you need to know.

First and foremost, make sure you are safely off the side of the road. Hanging out on the pavement is usually a recipe for disaster.

Then, it's time to take stock.

"The real problem," says Rob King, national technical manager for AMA Pro Racing, "is the fact that most modern motorcycles are just so reliable. If something happens, you're more than likely not going to be able to do much, other than call someone on your cell phone."

Still, there are a few things worth checking. Who knows? One of them might get you back on the road.

Your motorcycle engine needs three basic things to run; fuel, electricity and air. Consider looking at each of these components individually to see if there is anything simple to fix.

Fuel
When was the last time you gassed up? Running out of fuel, especially on a motorcycle without a fuel gauge or warning light, is the number one cause for motorcycles on the side of the road, according to Scott Riegle spokesman for MoTow, the AMA's emergency towing service.

If your bike has a petcock, make sure it's switched to reserve. Folks have been known to accidentally switch the fuel

supply off while trying to find reserve on the petcock, or even simply forgot they had that option.

If you're riding an older model motorcycle, and you know you've already been on reserve, you may not be dead in the water just yet. On carbureted models with a gravity fed fuel supply, try rocking the bike side to side. What you're hoping to do is fill the carburetor(s) up one last time with whatever may still be in the tank. Those precious ounces can mean the difference between walking a mile or more, and literally coasting into the gas station on fumes.

If your motorcycle is equipped with an electronic fuel pump, or a vacuum type petcock, this trick unfortunately won't work for you.

If you know you have fuel, but it's simply not getting to the engine, check for a blocked line. Now this can get complicated, but if you're running a gravity fed system, it may be as simple as removing whatever the obstruction is. King says more than likely it's a blocked fuel filter.

There are instances where fuel can get trapped in the line by an air bubble, and it's usually caused by heat. Here's an instance where doing nothing is the solution. Wait a few minutes for the bike to cool down, and you should be able to fire up. You might also try opening your gas cap and closing it again, allowing fuel to flow through the lines.

Electrical
Keep in mind, most modern motorcycles have worked out most electrical gremlins by way of solid-state components in the attempt to prevent this very thing from happening.

"First, look in the fuse box," King says, "and see if it's on fire."

The fuse box is the electrical junction point for your entire motorcycle. If it is on fire, or melted, that's a disaster and you're on the cell phone. Of course, the likelihood of the fuse box literally being on fire is low, so check the fuses to see if any are blown or have come loose.

"I've had a fuse blow and there was nothing wrong," King says. "Sometimes, the fuse just goes bad.

"Usually the bike will come with a spare fuse or two," King says. "Otherwise, borrow one from a non-essential component to get you home."

Remember that blown fuses can knock out all kinds of electronic components, not just ignition. Recently, for example, AMA staffer Lance Oliver had his electronic fuel pump stop working due to a blown fuse on his Triumph Speed Triple.

"I knew the fuel pump was suspect," says Oliver, "because it didn't make that familiar whine when I turned the key on."

After checking the fuse, Oliver borrowed a relay from his radiator fan. "You can do that in a pinch to get where you're going," says Oliver, "provided you're not at risk of overheating." (If you follow this advice, be extra careful to watch your engine temperature, or you could be in even greater trouble.)

Also remember that following the recommended maintenance schedule for your motorcycle can help prevent one of the most common causes of electrical failure - a tired or neglected battery. Make sure your battery has the proper amount of electrolyte before heading out.

There's a simple check for batteries. Does the engine crank when you hit the starter?

"If the starter engages and turns the engine over," King says, "it's probably not the battery."

If you hit the starter button and nothing happens, you could try making sure the battery is still hooked up properly.

"I once stopped to help a guy whose ground wire came loose," King says. "It just snapped in half, so we used a piece of coat hanger to get him going again."

If your battery is behaving properly, you could look to see if you're getting a spark.

To do that, you'll need to know where your spark plugs are, and you'll need to have a tool to get one out. Most motorcycles come with a small tool kit that'll include a spark plug wrench.

After removing the plug, reconnect the spark plug wire and lay the plug next to the spark plug hole. You want to be able to see the electrode end, but make sure the metal part of the plug is touching a metal part of the engine. Turn the engine over and look for a spark. If you get nothing, King says there's really not much you're going to be able to do unless you happen to carry spare spark plugs.

Air
Air is the third factor to keep you happily motoring down the road, and this is another case of preventive maintenance. If your air filter gets clogged, the engine can't breathe.

This really isn't a situation, though, that is likely to occur all of the sudden, and can be readily avoided by following your bike's maintenance schedule.

King says regular maintenance is the real key to avoiding unexpected stoppage of any kind.

If you're noticing a recurring theme, here, it's regular maintenance. Nearly all of these problems can be avoided with regular check-ups.