

## What to Do When Your Motorcycle Breaks Down

Modern motorcycles are no longer breakdowns waiting for a place to happen, so we may forget that it can still happen. But your bike can stop running when your least want it to do so. Better have a plan. From the August 2001 issue of *Motorcycle Cruiser* magazine.



It's one of those heart-stopping moments. You're drumming along in the farthest left of five lanes on an urban interstate highway when your engine just flat stops. No preliminary fade in power or a sputter of warning. It just goes blah, and a surge of adrenaline reams out your arteries before you can catch your breath.

At that moment, you need four hands and six eyes. Unless you want to get stranded on the center median for what could be hours, you need to make your way to the right shoulder. So, simultaneously, you signal, hold in the clutch (to keep yourself from slowing down any faster than you must), fish for the petcock lever in case your bike ran out of gas and jiggle the two possible controls that might have prompted an ignition failure—the kill switch and the main ignition switch. And all the while you must check traffic and wave your right hand to convey distress.

This is even more fun if you've blown a tire...

Mechanical devices fail. A bike that develops a problem a block from home on a quiet residential street is an annoyance, but a failure on a busy road is often a crisis that demands as much attention as oil in a corner. And a breakdown on the road can present a raft of additional challenges.

### **Gremlins Getcha**

Readers often think that test bikes given to magazines are exquisitely prepared machines that make bikes sold to consumers pale in comparison. Sometimes, the opposite is true. Several years ago I picked up a test bike and rode it a few blocks to the freeway, merged with traffic and proceeded into the left lane, where it promptly blew the rear tire. Thanks

to some luck and attentive drivers behind me, I quickly made my way to the right shoulder. After a phone call and a short wait, a truck arrived to retrieve me and the bike. A new wheel with a tire was mounted. On my next attempt to get back to the office, a loose coil wire disconnected a few miles later and we repeated the process. Another tester had a bigger adventure when his oil drain plug dropped out shortly after he left the distributor.

On another occasion I was riding along marveling at the amazing fuel mileage of a Harley-Davidson. I was calculating my approximate mileage—nearly 60 mpg—when the bike sputtered as I arrived at the confluence of Southern California's two major southbound interstates. I reached down and moved the petcock handle to the reserve position. It took a few seconds for me to realize the engine wasn't going to restart. I had to merge right (against traffic trying to merge the other way) to reach a shoulder that, thanks to construction, was not quite as wide as the bike I had. It turned out the little tube in the petcock body, which sticks up to create a reserve supply of fuel, was no longer in place.

Anyway, the moral of the story is to avoid becoming a speed bump, you need to have the thought that you might suddenly lose power in heavy, fast traffic. Somewhere in the back of your mind, there should be the beginning of a plan to deal with this possibility when you are in such a situation.

### **Exit Strategy**

In general, it is better to head for the right shoulder of a limited-access roadway, since it is usually wider, away from the fastest traffic and more accessible for anyone who comes to help. If there are emergency phones, they are usually on the right shoulder. And if you need to walk for help, you can do so. If there is heavy traffic, however, don't try to cross from the left shoulder to the right one. Wait for help. Of course, if there is an exit handy, try for it. If you have lanes to cross to get to the shoulder you chose, you must react quickly, pick your gaps in traffic immediately, move aggressively and clearly communicate the urgency of your situation to other drivers.

Then there is the matter of what to do when you roll to a stop. First, make sure you are out of danger. Get yourself and, if possible, your bike as far from moving traffic as you can. Don't endanger yourself to protect your bike. The shoulder of a highway is a hazardous place. I am amazed at how often drivers plow into the back of police cars pulled over onto the shoulder in broad daylight. Night time, the setting or rising sun in oncoming drivers' eyes and other vision obscurations increase the chances you won't be seen. Don't assume because you are out of the main travel lane that someone won't come down the shoulder. If there is room to get off the shoulder, do so. If this means finding something to support your sidestand on soft soil, find it. In the example above, I leaned my bike on its right handlebar against the concrete retaining wall, then climbed over the wall and walked back upstream, so that if someone hit the motorcycle, I wouldn't get tagged in the process.

Getting well away from the roadway may be even more important at night. Even sober drivers can have trouble judging where the edges of dark roads lie. Add curves, precipitation, fog or a tired or inebriated driver, and he may believe that your lights are those of a vehicle moving in the center of the road ahead and he should follow. There are two theories about using your lights after dark on the roadside. One says turn your lights off so disoriented drivers can't try to "follow" you. The other says keep your lights on so drivers can see and avoid you. Turning on hazard lights or a turn signal may at least alert a driver that something is there. If I had to choose which signal to use, it would be the one corresponding to the shoulder I was on. That way, a driver coming to the scene will think there is a person on a motorcycle preparing to turn and will go around him on the other side. If there is a second bike, shining your headlight on the bike ahead may help drivers recognize that both bikes are stopped and off the road. And having signals or hazard flashers blinking on all the stopped bikes amplifies the warning. When riding in a group at night, if we stop at the exit of a corner or just past the crest of a hill, we try to send a couple of bikes back to turn on their flashers to warn drivers to pay attention.

### **Fix or Flee?**

Once safely off the road, you have to decide whether you intend to fix your problem or seek assistance. Repairs require that you identify the source of the problem and have the necessary tools and components to make the repair. The most common on-the-road failure, a flat rear tire, requires a means of getting the wheel raised off the pavement, tools to remove the wheel, tire irons, a replacement tube or patch and a method of inflating the tire again. Also, you can try a can of flat fix, but that can damage your tire too. At night, you'd need some light. Even if you have a buddy who can take the wheel assembly to a shop for repair, you still need a method of supporting the bike and tools to remove the wheel.

If you need assistance, call someone, such as a friend with a truck or a roadside service organization or hope for assistance from a passerby. If you carry a cell phone, it may be your best line of summoning help, especially in urban areas where people seem less likely to stop and offer assistance. It also can be useful if you have phone service in a remote area. It helps if you have the numbers of people you'll call already programmed into your phone (or PDA) or a list of emergency phone numbers. This is useful if you call from a pay or emergency phone. (When I ride locally, I have a list of about a dozen friends with trucks that I take with me.) However, the farther from home you get, the shorter your list becomes. In that case, you need to find a local shop, garage or emergency roadside service to retrieve you and your ride. Many owners clubs now offer roadside assistance, and the Auto Club offers roadside service for motorcycles to members for an additional fee, or at least it does in Southern California.

### **Far from Home**

Out here in the West, there are still truly remote roads far from cities, with virtually no traffic. I love the feeling of having all that asphalt and scenery to myself, of being far from anyone else. At least until something goes wrong... If your bike breaks, you can sit

beside these roads for hours and never see another vehicle, especially at night. There is usually no cellular service, and the nearest source of assistance may be hours on foot. And these days you can no longer count on every driver who passes to stop and help someone who is obviously stranded. Even 30 years ago, I spent two hours on a road in northern Michigan where traffic was light, but far from absent, before some other motorcyclists stopped to offer aid. A cop went by without acknowledging my attempt to flag him down. If you ride isolated roads where you might get stranded, be prepared to fend entirely for yourself, perhaps overnight. At the minimum, that means having water and warm clothes, and you may want protection from the sun.

I have also heard too many tales of motorists who have run off of roads, crashed and been unable to move. Some were discovered by a road crew or passerby. A friend of mine was riding down a road in Wisconsin when he thought he saw a handlebar sticking up from the ditch. He went back to look and found a 60-something rider who had come out of a driveway on the other side of the road, run completely across the road, fallen in the ditch and was trapped under his H-D Sportster. Despite steady traffic, the disabled rider had been there for a few hours when my friend came to his aid. Another rider told me of using a whistle to summon help in a similar situation. A cell phone might be a lifesaver in such a situation. However, the old lifeline method, where you tell a family member or friend exactly where you are going and when to call for help if he hasn't heard from you, is still effective.

Back in the early 1970s, my touring kit included the tools needed to deal with a seized piston on my Kawasaki 500 triple. I used it on a couple of occasions too. Modern motorcycles break so infrequently that we don't really consider such eventualities. Carrying the tools to make major roadside repairs on today's complex motorcycles probably doesn't make sense, but, giving some thought to your plans for dealing with problems on the road can still be a lifesaver.