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Bicycle Traffic Laws

For Washington State

Common Questions about the Laws

What traffic laws apply to cyclists?

When riding on a roadway, a cyclist has all the rights and responsibilities of a vehicle driver RCW 46.61.755. Cyclists who violate traffic laws may be ticketed RCW 46.61.750.

Where is cycling prohibited?

1. On designated sections of our state's limited access highway system. Call 360-705-7277 to obtain a map.
2. Local governments may adopt ordinances banning cycling on specific roads or on the sidewalks within business districts. The City of Bellingham prohibits sidewalk riding in the downtown area. Contact Kim Brown at 778-7900 for more information.

Do children have to follow traffic laws?

Yes. Parents or guardians may not knowingly permit bicycle traffic violations by their ward RCW 46.61.700.

May cyclists ride side-by-side?

Yes, but not more than two abreast RCW 46.61.770.

What equipment is required on bicycles used at night?

A white front light (not a reflector) visible for 500 feet and a red rear reflector are required. A red rear light may be used in addition to the required reflector RCW 46.61.780.

Are cyclists required to wear helmets in Washington State?

Currently, there is no state law requiring helmet use. Some cities and counties, however, do have helmet laws. No jurisdictions in Whatcom County require helmet use.

What lane position should a cyclist use?

1. When traveling slower than traffic, cyclists should ride as far right as is safe, except when:
 - a) preparing to turn,
 - b) when passing another vehicle,
 - c) when on a multi-lane one-way road RCW 46.61.770.
2. Cycling on road shoulders is legal RCW 46.61.770.
3. Cyclists may occupy the middle of the lane when:
 - a) traveling at the speed of traffic,
 - b) when the lane is too narrow to permit a car to share the lane,
 - c) when road conditions (poor surface, drain grates, parked cars, etc.) prevent riding to the far right.
4. At intersections, cyclists should utilize the rightmost lane or portion of lane designated for their destination. However, if no turn lane is available, cyclists should occupy the left side of the lane to turn left, just right of the center of the lane to travel straight and the right side to turn right.

Are cyclists required to use a bike lane or path adjacent to a roadway?

No. Cyclists may choose to ride on the path, bike lane, shoulder or travel lane as suits their safety needs RCW 46.61.770.





RCW 46.04.500 Definition of “Roadway”

“Roadway” means that portion of a highway improved, designed, or ordinarily used for vehicular travel, exclusive of the sidewalk or shoulder even though such sidewalk or shoulder is used by persons riding bicycles. In the event a highway includes two or more separated roadways, the term “roadway” shall refer to any such roadway separately but shall not refer to all such roadways collectively.

RCW 46.04.670 “Vehicle”

“Vehicle” includes every device capable of being moved upon a public highway and in, upon or by which any persons or property is or may be transported or drawn upon a public highway, including bicycles. The term does not include devices other than bicycles moved by human or animal power or used exclusively upon stationary rails or tracks. Mopeds shall not be considered vehicles or motor vehicles for the purpose of chapter 46.70 RCW. Bicycles shall not be considered vehicles for the purposes of chapter 46.12, 46.16 or 46.70 RCW.

RCW 46.61.160 Restrictions on use of limited-access highway by bicyclists.

The Department of Transportation may by order, and local authorities may by ordinance or resolution, with respect to any limited access highway under their respective jurisdictions prohibit the use of any such highway by funeral processions, or by parades, pedestrians, bicycles or other non-motorized traffic, or by any person operating a motor-driven cycle. Bicyclists may use the right shoulder of limited access highways except where prohibited. The Department of Transportation may by order, and local authorities may by ordinance or resolution, with respect to any limited-access highway under their respective jurisdictions prohibit the use of the shoulders of any such highway by bicycles within urban areas or upon other sections of the highway where such use is deemed to be unsafe.

The Department of Transportation or the local authority adopting any such prohibitory regulation shall erect and maintain official traffic control devices on the limited-access roadway on which such regulations are applicable, and when so erected no person may disobey the restrictions stated on such devices.

RCW 46.61.700 Parent or guardian shall not authorize or permit violation by a child or ward.

The parent of any child and the guardian of any ward shall not authorize or knowingly permit any such child or ward to violate any of the provisions of this chapter.

RCW 46.61.750 Effect of regulations – Penalty.

1. It is a traffic infraction for any person to do any act forbidden or fail to perform any act required in RCW46.61.750 through 46.61.780.
2. These regulations applicable to bicycles apply whenever a bicycle is operated upon any highway or upon any bicycle path, subject to those exceptions stated herein.

RCW 46.61.755 Traffic laws apply to persons riding bicycles.

Every person riding a bicycle upon a roadway shall be granted all of the rights and shall be subject to all of the duties applicable to the driver of a vehicle by this chapter, except as to special regulations in RCW 46.61.750 through 46.61.780 and except as to those provisions of this chapter which by their nature can have no application.

RCW 46.61.758 Hand signals.

All hand signals required of persons operating bicycles shall be given in the following manner:

1. Left turn. Left hand and arm extended horizontally beyond the side of the bicycle;
2. Right turn. Left hand and arm extended upward beyond the side of the bicycle, or right hand and arm extended horizontally to the right side of the bicycle;
3. Stop or decrease speed. Left hand and arm extended downward beyond the side of the bicycle. The hand signals required by this section shall be given before initiation of a turn.

RCW 46.61.760 Riding on bicycles.

1. A person propelling a bicycle shall not ride other than upon or astride a permanent and regular seat attached thereto.
2. No bicycle shall be used to carry more persons at one time than the number for which it is designed and equipped.

RCW 46.61.765 Clinging to vehicles.

No person riding upon any bicycle, coaster, roller skates, sled or toy vehicle shall attach the same or himself to any vehicle upon a roadway.

RCW 46.61.770 Riding upon roadways & bicycle paths.

1. Every person operating a bicycle upon a roadway at a rate of speed less than the normal flow of traffic at the particular time and place shall ride as near to the right side of the right through lane as is safe except as may be appropriate while preparing to make or while making turning movements, or while overtaking and passing another bicycle or vehicle proceeding in the same direction. A person operating a bicycle upon a roadway or highway other than a limited-access highway, which roadway or highway carries traffic in one direction only and has two or more marked traffic lanes, may ride as near to the left side of the left through lane as is safe. A person operating a bicycle upon a roadway may use the shoulder of the roadway or any specially designated bicycle lane if such exists.
2. Persons riding bicycles upon a roadway shall not ride more than two abreast except on paths or parts of roadways set aside for the exclusive use of bicycles.

RCW 46.61.775 Carrying articles.

No person operating a bicycle shall carry any package, bundle or article which prevents the driver from keeping at least one hand upon the handle bars.

RCW 46.61.780 Lamps & other equipment on bicycles.

1. Every bicycle when in use during the hours of darkness as defined in RCW 46.37.200 shall be equipped with a lamp on the front which shall emit a white light visible from a distance of at least five hundred feet to the front and with a red reflector on the rear of a type approved by the state patrol which shall be visible from all distances from one hundred feet to six hundred feet to the rear when directly in front of lawful lower beams of head lamps on a motor vehicle. A lamp emitting a red light visible from a distance of five hundred feet to the rear may be used in addition to the red reflector.
2. Every bicycle shall be equipped with a brake, which will enable the operator to make the braked wheels skid on dry, level, clean pavement.

RCW 46.04.071 Definition of “Bicycle”

“Bicycle” means every device propelled solely by human power upon which a person or persons may ride, having two tandem wheels either of which is sixteen or more inches in diameter, or three wheels, any one of which is more than twenty inches in diameter.

RCW 46.04.200 Definition of “Hours of Darkness”

“Hours of darkness” means the hours from one-half hour after sunset to one-half hour before sunrise, and any other time when persons or objects may not be clearly discernible at a distance of five hundred feet.

RCW 46.04.197 Definition of “Highway”

“Highway” means the entire width between the boundary lines of every way publicly maintained when any part thereof is open to the use of the public for purpose of vehicular travel.