

Bicyclist FAQs: Sharing the Road

What are the laws about bicycling that I need to know? As a general rule, bicyclists have the same rights and responsibilities as drivers of vehicles, and they should follow the California Vehicle Code in the same way that drivers do. Like car drivers, bicyclists are not allowed to cover both ears with headphones or earbuds, nor are they allowed to hold their phone. Bicyclists should stop at all stop signs and red lights, and are required to have a white front light and a red rear reflector when biking at night. Bicyclists under 18 must wear a helmet that fits and is properly buckled.

I feel safer riding against traffic so I can see the cars coming. Is that legal? No, bicyclists must ride with the flow of traffic according to the California Vehicle Code. Wrong-way riding is the cause of many collisions because drivers are not expecting bicyclists on the wrong side of the road.

Am I allowed to ride on the sidewalk? Riding on sidewalks, especially wrong-way, is legal but discouraged due to safety risks. Bicyclists on the sidewalk are much less visible to drivers, increasing the chances of collisions caused by drivers turning (left or right) in front of bicyclists. There is also an increased risk of being hit by drivers backing out of driveways. In Palo Alto, riding on sidewalks in the Cal Ave and Downtown Business Districts is prohibited. However, bicycles are allowed in either direction on all multi-use paths, and bicyclists are encouraged to ride on the recently-constructed two-way multi-use paths on the south side of Arastradero near Fletcher and Gunn and on Louis and Amarillo near Ohlone. Pedestrians have the lawful right-of-way on sidewalks, and bicyclists should be courteous and ride at pedestrian speed.

Where am I supposed to ride on the road? When riding on a road with a bike lane and traveling at a slower pace than cars, you must ride in the bike lane. However, you are allowed to exit the bike lane if there is an obstruction (litter or a parked car, for example) or to get in position to make a left turn. *Always look over your left shoulder and wait until it's clear before merging into the travel lane.*

If you are riding on a road that does not have a bike lane, the law says you should ride “as close as practicable to the right curb or edge of the roadway.” However, there are lots of exceptions to this positioning, including when preparing to make a left turn, when avoiding a hazard, and *when the lane is too narrow for a bicycle and a vehicle to travel side-by-side within the lane.* On residential streets, the lane is often too narrow to share, and there are usually cars parked on these streets which pose an additional hazard for people on bikes. **Bicyclists are safest when they are visible and predictable.** The best place for a bicyclist to ride on a residential street is in a straight predictable line outside the dangerous “door zone,” that is, about 5 feet to the left of parked cars.



There are two bicyclists in this photo.
Which one is easier to see?



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Do I have to ride single-file? There is no requirement that bicyclists ride single file in most states, including California. However, bicyclists should be courteous and not block the travel lane when the road is wide enough to share. Bicyclists riding in groups should spread out and ride no more than two-abreast.



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