

Safety Check ✓

From the Safety Chick

To See or To Be Seen?

(That is an important question)

One recent Friday evening, a good half hour after darkness fell, I was driving my car south along Wheeling Road between Palatine and Camp McDonald Roads in Prospect Heights. This stretch of road has two lanes, a pretty rough surface (even for a car) and a gravel shoulder. Since I drive this route at least once a week, I feel pretty familiar with the conditions. What I was not expecting was a cyclist. To my surprise . . . there was a cyclist, suddenly, right in front of me. No lights, no headlight, no taillight. If there was a rear reflector I didn't see it. The backs of his shoes did have reflective tape. As the car headlights illuminated him, I was able to move to the left and give him some space.

If you are riding at night, the proper bicycle lighting is important. You may think it is important so you can see the road. Just as important is so you can be seen. Drivers need to recognize you as a bicycle so they can predict how fast you are moving and your expected direction.

Illinois law states . . .

“Every bicycle, when in use at nighttime, shall be equipped with a lamp on the front, which shall emit a white light visible from a distance of a least 500 feet to the front and with a red reflector on the rear, of a type approved by the department, which shall be visible from all distances from 100 feet to 600 feet to the rear when directly in front of lawful lower beams of headlamps on a motor vehicle . . .”

Researching a few of the more popular bicycle oriented websites will produce a lot of information on lighting systems. Improved technology continues to upgrade features to meet the needs for range, light output, style and cost. There are plusses and minuses to each system, a combination of systems maybe needed to meet your needs. Adding reflective tape or apparel also adds to the ability to be seen.

Some factors to consider . . .

1. How long will you be riding after dark? There are disposable battery systems and rechargeable battery systems. Riding for 15 minutes after dark, the basics may be great. Riding for an hour or two, you need a powerful system.
2. Will you be riding on well-lit or un-lit streets? Some systems have high and low beam with “logical switching.” Move from low beam – to high beam – back to low beam without a blackout.
3. You need to be seen from all directions. A handle-bar mounted headlamp is a good stable light pointing straight ahead. Cars coming towards you should be able to see you

clearly. Add a helmet mounted headlamp, now you've got a light that illuminates the direction that you are looking in. A big help when you are turning a corner or checking for traffic on side streets. On the other hand, if the helmet light is looking all around, will the head-on traffic distinguish you as a bicycle?

There are a lot of options, you can find information on many websites including: Adventure Cyclist, TurboCat Lighting Systems, Bluedome and KenKifer.