

ATV ALERT

Being safe starts with being aware of potential dangers on ATVs.

by *Kindra Gordon*

The ATV (all-terrain vehicle) has increased in popularity as the vehicle of choice for farm and ranch work, as well as recreational uses like trail riding and hunting. But with the convenience of the ATV comes a very big safety risk if it is not operated properly.

According to the most recent data available from the Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC), in 2006 there were 750 reported ATV-related deaths, and nearly 150,000 injuries treated in emergency rooms. Children under the age of 16 are involved in about one-third of the accidents and injuries reported.

With that said, proponents of ATV safety stress that youth and adults who own or operate an ATV should take the time to be properly trained to ride these machines.

“The highest percentage of deaths occur in the first 30 days of buying and riding the ATV, so clearly lack of experience is the issue,” says Randall Reeder, an Ohio State University (OSU) Extension agricultural engineer and coordinator of statewide ATV training programs. “Users don’t perceive the ATV to be as dangerous as it can be.”

ATV misconceptions

Reeder says there are a number of reasons why many ATV riders fail to make safety their No. 1 priority. These include:

1. The perception that ATVs are not dangerous. “ATVs are often thought of as toys,” Reeder says. “Or, at the very least, thought of as being no more dangerous than, say, a riding lawnmower.”

2. The misconception that the long seat is designed for more than one rider. “ATVs should only have one person on them,” Reeder says. “The long seat is designed that way so riders can shift their weight when going up or down hilly terrain.”

3. The idea that ATVs are safe to ride on pavement. “ATVs should never be ridden on pavement,” Reeder says. “The design of the ATV is such that it doesn’t turn like you normally expect, or in some cases not at all, on paved surfaces.”

4. The idea that ATVs are “one size fits all.” Riding the wrong ATV is a contributing factor to accidents and injuries. “A small rider on a full-size ATV, even if all other precautions are taken, can be just as dangerous as not following safety guidelines,” Reeder says. Put another way, he asks,

More ATV safety tips

- ▶ Remember to lean into the turn and keep your feet securely on the foot pegs or rests.
- ▶ When pulling a trailer with an ATV, hook onto the hitch, not the metal rack behind the seat. The metal rack is too high and could pull you over sideways or backwards.
- ▶ If you are using an ATV to move cattle, be especially careful as cattle can be unpredictable and can turn quickly. If you try to turn too quickly, you could roll your ATV.

“Would you allow someone to drive a car if he or she can’t reach the pedals?”

To this point, full-size ATVs have a sticker that says no one under 16 years of age should drive. For youth under age 16, smaller versions of ATVs are available.

Rules to remember

Because the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA) is not required to regulate ATVs, the responsibility for careful operation rests with the ATV rider. If that rider is a child, Tim Buche, president of the ATV Safety Institute, emphasizes that parental supervision is key for the safety of young riders.

There are six common rules that ATV safety groups like the CPSC advise:

1. Wear an approved motorcycle helmet. Also wear eye protection, boots with ankle support, gloves, long pants, and a long-sleeved shirt or jacket as conditions warrant.

2. Do not allow children on adult ATVs. Children (and some adults) lack

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the strength and skill to correct an unstable ATV weighing 500 to 1,000 pounds (lb.) and capable of traveling 55 mph or more. Children ages 12-16 should ride ATVs with an engine size of 90 cc or less. Moreover, it is suggested children under 12 should not operate an ATV — and this is the law in some states.

3. Do not ride on pavement, or any public road, even dirt or gravel. Collision with cars, trucks and other motor vehicles

can be deadly. Also, avoid excessive speeds. With their short wheelbase and maneuverability, ATVs are very unstable and can easily flip on uneven ground. Go at a speed that is proper for the terrain, visibility conditions, and your experience.

4. Do not ride tandem. Only allow one rider per ATV.

5. Do not ride under the influence of drugs or alcohol.

6. Get trained. All riders are encouraged to take a training course. Even if you've been riding for years, a training course is an opportunity to learn new safety techniques.

For ATV training sessions near you, check with your local 4-H Extension office. "We see the potential for 4-H as a national organization to train young people, especially those in rural areas where ATV usage is the highest," says Dee Jepsen, OSU Extension's state safety leader.

OSU Extension received a National 4-H Council grant in 2008 and 2009 to train ATV users on basic safety guidelines and proper operation. Grants to other states are offering similar programs.

For additional ATV safety or training information visit www.atvsafety.org or www.atvsafety.gov.

