

## Moving Together: Getting Around A-Town



## Nighttime Visibility for Cyclists and Pedestrians

by *Elisabeth Carr-Jones and Scott Smith*

The evening (and for some, the morning) commute now occurs at night. Here are some tips for staying safe on a bike or on foot.

### Bicycling

Briefly, what you need to be legal on a bicycle at night in Massachusetts (General Laws Chapter 85, section 11B) is:

- A white headlamp (not just a reflector)
- A red rear reflector or light, and
- Reflectors or reflective clothing visible from the sides and on the ankles or pedals.

Although bikes come with the required reflectors, you usually need to add the headlamp. Don't ride at night without at least this equipment.

The headlamp serves two purposes: first, it announces your presence to motorists, cyclists and pedestrians in front of you, and second, it lights the way in front of you. The latter is particularly important on the Minuteman Bikeway, which is not lit at night. Nearly any white light, even a flashlight attached to the handlebar with a large rubber band, will meet the legal requirement. However, you often need something brighter. Imagine a fallen tree branch, a black animal, or a pedestrian who is not following the advice in this column, just beyond the beam of your headlamp. Adjust your speed accordingly.

Options for headlamps include small battery powered lights, generator powered lights that may be built into the bike, or more powerful lamps powered by rechargeable batteries. The latter, although they can cost more than \$50, light the way well and are also handy in the house when there is a power outage. If you are using a bright headlamp on the bike path, point it downward, as a courtesy to path users coming the other way.

Now to protect your rear.

The reflector that comes with the bike is the bare minimum, and is not very visible. When there is faster traffic behind you, a red taillight (either flashing or steady) is a good idea.

The pedal reflectors are more important than you might think. Why? They are orange, a more visible color than red. They also are moving, and the low beams of the car behind you are aimed straight at them. Some cyclists also use reflective Velcro straps around their ankles. These help visibility, and help keep their pants legs off the chain.

For more information, an excellent resource is Pennsylvania's Bicycle Driver's Manual,

downloadable at <ftp://ftp.dot.state.pa.us/public/PubsForms/Publications/PUB%20380.pdf> . Chapter 8 (page 29) covers night riding.

## **Walking**

Even though there are no special nighttime laws for pedestrians, there are many things that you can do to reduce your risk of traffic conflicts.

Use crosswalks and traffic signals. In Arlington there are fewer pedestrians after dark, and traffic is often moving faster. Drivers may not expect to see pedestrians, so it is especially important to cross the street at crosswalks and traffic signals.

Never assume that drivers see you. It may take a little longer, but it's preferable to wait for a break in traffic before crossing roadways at night.

Avoid distractions. It's tempting to talk on the phone or listen to music while walking at night, but it is a better idea to stay alert to your surroundings.

Watch your step. Uneven sidewalks, curbs and many other potential hazards are less obvious at night.

Light colors are better than dark colors, and retro-reflective is the best of all. A pedestrian wearing black can be seen at about 55 feet, This increases to 180 feet for wearing white. However, pedestrians wearing retro-reflective materials can be seen by drivers at 500 feet. Many backpacks, shoes and recreational clothing come with retro-reflective trim, but you can also buy the trim at fabric stores and attach it to items you wear or carry at night.

Carry a flashlight. LEDs have made small, efficient and bright flashlights easy to carry. A flashlight can brighten dark places on sidewalks or the bike path. Even if the beam of the flashlight is pointed down at the bike path, that is often the first thing an approaching cyclist will see.

Consider wearing a flasher. Small clip-on flashers are lightweight and affordable for nighttime use. These are particularly valuable for runners or for situations where you cannot be on a sidewalk.

Make your stroller more visible. It's simple to outfit your stroller with flashing or retro-reflective trim for nighttime strolls. Some new strollers are equipped with retro-reflective coatings, making the structural elements highly visible at night.

Don't forget your dog. Attractive, retro-reflective dog collars, leashes, harnesses and coats are available to make your dog visible during nighttime walks.

The organization, *Walking in Arlington*, has developed a Safety Tips handout for pedestrians and drivers, available on the [walkinginarlington.com](http://walkinginarlington.com) website.

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