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The Dutch Reach: A No-Tech Way to Save Bicyclists' Lives

8-10 minutes

This simple change in the way you get out of your car can save lives — of cyclists, drivers and passengers. Here's how to do it, and why it's so effective.



CreditCreditCalum Heath

If Michael Charney has his way, more Americans would adopt a simple method to prevent “doorings,” a type of collision when a driver or passenger in a parked car opens a door into the path of a cyclist.

He calls the maneuver the “Dutch Reach,” and it works like this: When you are about to exit the car, you reach *across* your body for the door handle with your far or opposite hand. This action forces you to turn toward the side view mirror, out and then back over your shoulder to be sure a bicyclist is not coming from behind. Only then do you slowly open the door.

“Dodging open car doors is a daily risk” for urban cyclists, said Dr. Charney, a retired physician and dedicated cyclist.

Fatal bike crashes are on the rise in the United States; in 2016 the [highest number of cyclist deaths](#) since 1991 was recorded. The research doesn’t say how many of those deaths are from doorings specifically, or how effective the Dutch Reach method is in preventing crashes, but [a study done in 2015 in Vancouver](#), British Columbia, found that the car-to-cyclist crash type with the most injuries was doorings, said Kay Teschke, professor emeritus at the [School of Population and Public Health](#) at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver.

“A lot of people think because cars are stopped, doorings can’t be serious, but they are very common, and they absolutely can be very serious,” she said. “There have been deaths.”

Dr. Teschke and other experts say infrastructure — like designated bike lanes that separate traffic and bicyclists — is a key to safety, but there are actions cyclists and drivers can take on their own.

Make It a Habit, Start With a Ribbon

Dr. Charney created the [Dutch Reach Project](#) in 2016 after a 27-

year-old nursing student rode into an open car door and died five blocks from his home in Cambridge, Mass. Her death followed several other recent cyclist fatalities in the area.

He said the Dutch Reach is taught in some bike safety classes and professional fleet trainings, and now two states — [Massachusetts](#) and [Illinois](#) — include it in their official driver's manuals. Even so, the method is not widely known or used in the United States.

Dr. Charney acknowledges that it is difficult to change behavior and learn new habits. "I had a hard time retooling myself," he said. "But it's a simple behavioral fix; if you do it, it works."

He suggests putting a ribbon on your car door latch as a visual reminder that you're supposed to use your far hand to open the door instead of just instinctually opening the door as you always have.

This small maneuver goes beyond being a good Samaritan. It can help drivers and passengers avoid serious and costly damage to cars and the hassle of repairs, and protects them from stepping out into traffic and getting injured or killed by other cars, as well as bicycles.

Tips That Go Beyond the Dutch Reach

There is no name in Dutch for this technique — it's just second nature to Dutch drivers, and has been for years. It has been deeply ingrained in the country's culture.

"It's just what Dutch people do," said Fred Wegman, professor emeritus of [Traffic Safety](#) at [Delft University of Technology](#) and the former managing director of the [National Institute for Road Safety Research SWOV](#) in the Netherlands. "All Dutch are taught it. It's

part of regular driver education.”

The robust bike safety culture that exists in the Netherlands today was not always the case. Serious injury and death were once more prevalent.

“But they just did not accept it. They systematically and proactively went about changing their safety systems,” Dr. Teschke said. “They tried big things and small things to see what will work. They just take safety really, really seriously.”

We can, too, she explained, even if we don’t have the same cycling culture, or even the same number of cyclists. Here are some other tactics that we could all apply.

Teach Bicycle Safety Early

That education begins long before getting behind the wheel. Dutch schoolchildren starting at about 10 to 12 years old learn about road safety for roughly one hour a week for 40 weeks. “It’s part of the curriculum in primary school,” Professor Wegman said.

Schoolchildren learn how to ride bikes safely and afterward are tested on their bikes in traffic. They learn the importance of shared roadways to make sure that both drivers and cyclists are aware of each other and know each other’s rules, he said.

He said he had observed that a number of cities and countries in Europe have embraced the Dutch Reach, and so can Americans. “It’s not unique to the Dutch” anymore, he said.

[The League of American Bicyclists](#) offers resources to cyclists of all ages to learn about [Smart Cycling](#) — from safety tips to how to find a [local bike safety class](#).

Keep Bike Running Lights On, Day and Night

In [a recent Danish study](#), keeping your bicycle lights on all the time reduced the chances of a collision by nearly 50 percent, Dr. Teschke said. Bike-sharing programs typically keep the lights on in their fleets, she said, most likely one of the reasons those programs tend to have lower crash rates than for those riding personal bikes.

Consider Professional Defensive Driver Training

Driver training is, in general, more rigorous and more costly in the Netherlands than in the United States. “In the Netherlands, parents are not allowed to teach their children,” Professor Wegman said. “We have formal driver education schools.”

Instruction is highly regulated, and classes are expensive. The cost of getting a driver's license in 2017 was about \$2,734 (2,300 euros), which includes about 38 hours of professional instruction, he said, quoting figures from the [Dutch Driver License Agency](#).

The far hand method of opening the door is included in drivers' training and the exam that candidates take before getting licensed. “If they fail to do it or do it incorrectly, they fail the test,” Professor Wegman said. “The exam is serious business.”

It's never too late to improve your driving knowledge. Drivers of all ages and levels can get instruction on and offline offered by many organizations, including [AAA](#), [AARP](#) and the [National Safety Council](#) will teach the “Far Hand Reach” technique to both operator-side and passenger-side users starting in January.

A Survivor Shares His Advice

Peter Hahn, 38, an analyst for the Defense Department and a regular bicyclist in Washington, had several near misses over the years, but he avoided a serious crash until last year when he biked down a quiet side street at 15-plus miles per hour. “As I approached an intersection, a door opened and my swerve wasn’t enough to avoid the door corner poking into my front spokes,” he recounted, and he was launched onto the pavement.

He awoke to the sounds of a fire truck and an ambulance, “and someone telling me not to move. I had to have 11 centimeters of titanium and eight screws inserted to stabilize” a serious arm fracture, he said, and was in a cast for weeks, attended weekly physical therapy sessions and has a lifelong scar.

“I lost a third of a year to that injury. I’m able to do pull-ups and hold my infant son,” he said, “but I will never be the same. If the car driver had opened — at first — a crack, instead of fully, I would have made it home that night.”

The Dutch Reach could have an effect if it becomes second nature, “like checking both ways before you cross a road,” Mr. Hahn said. Until then, his advice to cyclists: ride a foot farther out on quiet side streets. For drivers: “a mere glance in the side-view plus blind spot would all but eliminate dooring.”

“The Dutch have evolved into a culture that respects the right for everyone to get home safely,” Dr. Charney said. “It’s a change I’d love to see here.”