

**H**ERE'S A LETTER from Patricia Wilson, a motorcyclist who wants us to benefit from her experience:

*I have a suggestion for a future article that addresses bike safety. The subject is what bikers casually call "road rash," but which, in fact, is no different from second or third degree burns.*

*I went down on July 4th, 1999 wearing nearly nothing (very hot day that day and I wasn't going that far, uh-huh). I thanked God (and still do) that I have no memory of what happened between the time the front wheel started to go mushy and when I woke up on the pavement. I remember thinking how lucky I was to have this happen this close to University of Michigan's trauma-burn unit. I also remember thinking how lucky I was that I didn't lose any skin on my back or butt: It gave me a way to lay without lying on wounds. I had visions of one of those wheel beds.*

*I don't remember them doing it, but I had a tube inserted in my chest wall to re-inflate the lung that was punctured by a broken rib. It seems strange, but I never had the feeling that I was mortally injured—just injured very badly. When they moved me out of emergency, it was into a trauma-burns unit at University of Michigan Hospital in Ann Arbor. Lucky me; they know how to treat burns. Now I do, too, and I think that knowledge should be shared so people have a better understanding of what they are risking when they ride unprotected.*

*The broken shoulder took about a month to heal. The burns took nearly two years. You get to expand your vocabulary in interesting ways: Eschar, Silviline, Kerlix, debride, and finally, Jobst. You learn that morphine is great, except for when they come in to 'dress' your burns. You learn that the turnover is fairly high among nurses in trauma-burns because they can't handle the screams. You discover that the friendly cotton washcloth is really woven out of barb-wire. You learn that this daily process is going to go on not for days or weeks but for months.*

*I think the worst thing about the daily dressings (gives a whole new meaning to the daily grind) was the anticipation—knowing that the agony you were going through was going to happen again tomorrow and the next day and the next. . . . Indeed, it goes on until all of the wounds have completely closed.*

*Closed, but not healed; for now, you graduate to the Jobst garments, which you learn are worn to help minimize (not eliminate) scarring. Depending on where the wounds are, this can be at least uncomfortable. Remember how hot it was the day I went down? Imagine being wrapped in latex fabric in that kind of weather, twenty-four/seven.*

*Well, in the end, it works. My scars are visible, but not horrific like burn scars used to be, and I did not require skin grafts. It wasn't until five years later that I rode again, but that was mental, not physical. I purchased the bike, the helmet, and the summer-weight armored jacket in that order. Speaking of helmets, I examined mine when I got home from the hospital. Had I not been wearing it when I went down, I would have lost a good part of my face to the road.*

Patricia makes a good point: Abrasions and burns are similar in the way they damage the skin. A fall at 25 mph results in damage to unprotected skin like that produced by a frying pan containing very hot oil. A faster fall, naturally, produces more damage.

Protective gear makes all the difference. A good set of leathers is probably the best protection available, especially when rac-

are some circumstances where going to the ER is especially important. Abrasions over joints, for example, can easily spread infection into the joint itself. And an infected joint may stop working permanently after only a day or so of an infection. Abrasions over bony points (knuckles, ankles, etc.) carry the danger of a bone infection (osteomyelitis). Road rash on the face may lead to

# ROAD RASH DECISION



by flash gordon, md

ing. The problem with them is that riding to work wearing leathers and then changing is time consuming, and more than a little inconvenient. Leathers aren't the best thing in an all-day rainstorm, either. That's why many motorcyclists who spend lots of time in the saddle—touring and commuting riders, for example—often wear fabric suits like those from Aerostich ([www.aerostich.com](http://www.aerostich.com)) and Motoport ([www.motoport.com](http://www.motoport.com)). They've got the advantage of either being inherently waterproof (Aerostich) or have available zip-in liners (Motoport). And the big advantage of these types of suits is that they fit over your everyday clothing.

For folks who want to ride in jeans and a denim jacket, Bohn Body Armor ([www.bohnarmor.com](http://www.bohnarmor.com)) has armored underclothing that fits beneath your outerwear or long-sleeved t-shirt. Though it's less protection than full leathers, it's enough to save your skin.

In hot weather, perforated and mesh jackets, like those from Vanson ([www.vansonleathers.com](http://www.vansonleathers.com)) and Joe Rocket ([www.joe-rocket.com](http://www.joe-rocket.com)) among others provide substantially more protection than a T-shirt, and are almost as cool.

In the event you do get "road rash," there

permanent scarring, or if there's any dirt in the wound, to permanent tattooing.

Abrasions on the hands (especially the thick, specialized skin on the palm side) should be treated at an ER. Improper care can lead to contractures and loss of use. That's why I always wear good gloves. I find that deerskin, like that from Thurlow ([www.thurlowleather.com](http://www.thurlowleather.com)) and Lee Parks Design ([www.leeparksdesign.com](http://www.leeparksdesign.com)) is tougher than leather and more comfortable.

I hope this information helps. I'm going to close with some more words from Patricia Wilson:

*I hope you consider writing about this. I think it was David Hough who said, "When you go down, you will be wearing what you decided to wear when you got on". Please help people make the right decision.* 🍓

flash gordon, md's, book *Blood, Sweat, and Gears: Ramblings on Motorcycling and Medicine* is available from Whitehorse Press, (800) 531-1133 or through his website. Have a suggestion for a column? E-mail flash through his Website, [www.doc-flash.com](http://www.doc-flash.com)