

Detroit hospital deals with injury aftermath of electric scooters' descent on city

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When electric scooters hit Detroit streets in mid-2018, they were an immediate hit.

Now, a little more than a year later, the still-popular scooters are leaving some novice or unprotected users with a range of serious injuries.

And electric scooters are leaving more than broken bones in Detroit. Doctors at Detroit Medical Center are dealing with dislocated limbs and head trauma injuries that represent a new and dangerous pattern of accidents.

Since April 2019, DMC has admitted 18 trauma patients for scooter injuries. The real number of people showing up in the hospital's emergency room is much higher, said Robert Klever, Medical Director of the Emergency Department at Detroit Receiving Hospital.

More: [Viral video shows youth tossing scooters into Detroit River \(/story/news/local/michigan/detroit/2019/08/23/detroit-police-scooters-detroit-river/2093659001/\)](#)

More: [Detroit honeymoon now over for Bird, Lime rental scooters \(/story/money/2018/10/12/detroit-bird-lime-rental-scooters-near-misses/1593489002/\)](#)

Those 18 patients were people who were admitted to the hospital and suffering severe injuries (one admitted under Klever's treatment had a skull fracture and brain bleed from a scooter accident).

The hospital has actually seen four to five times that number of patients with scooter injuries in the same time frame, people with more quickly fixed issues that don't require admission.

Klever has seen a thumb dislocation, a head injury requiring staples and a shoulder injury, all caused by scooters, but they didn't make it onto the hospital's scooter injury record.

Since scooters and the injuries they leave behind are still a relatively new trend, some medical facilities, including Henry Ford Health Systems, aren't yet able to track the scooter injuries they see.

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The injuries don't mean scooters aren't popular in Detroit. About 15 months after Bird first arrived, there are now four scooter brands in the city: Bird, Lime, Spin and the newest addition, Boaz Bikes (a sit-down scooter).

The scooters aren't just a hit in Detroit — in 2018, people across the nation took 38.5 million rides on shared e-scooters, according to the [National Association of City Transportation Officials](https://nacto.org/2019/04/17/84-million-trips-on-shared-bikes-and-scooters/) (<https://nacto.org/2019/04/17/84-million-trips-on-shared-bikes-and-scooters/>).

While scooter safety regulations vary by city, Detroit did lay out some scooter guidelines around the time the first wave of Birds hit the city, issuing a July 2018 [memo that lists requirements](https://detroitmi.gov/sites/detroitmi.localhost/files/2018-10/Dockless%20Scooters.pdf) (<https://detroitmi.gov/sites/detroitmi.localhost/files/2018-10/Dockless%20Scooters.pdf>) for scooter upkeep and use.

Detroit users are only supposed to use scooters on sidewalks "when doing so presents a low risk of disturbance to pedestrians" (otherwise, they're supposed to use bike lanes on the right side of roads). Scooters are supposed to be parked standing up, and not in any spot that would obscure traffic or pedestrian flow.

Regardless, you've probably narrowly avoided getting mowed down by a scooter, nearly stumbled over a pack of them, or watched someone wipe out on a sidewalk near you (as I saw one rider do right in front of me while I was reporting this story). If they exist, scooter safety rules aren't always clear in cities like Detroit, which don't always promote them, said attorney Brandon Hewitt.



A herd of scooters parked in front of downtown Detroit's Chase Building Oct. 3. The relatively new Detroit transportation choice is landing some users in local emergency rooms. (Photo: Steve Pepple)

"As of right now, you can pretty much ride a scooter anywhere," said Hewitt, who works with Michigan Auto Law.

When you consider scooter accidents in relation to car or bike accidents, it's tough to quantify scooters' safety or danger. Last year, there were more than 11,000 car accidents in Wayne County, according to Michigan State Police. As of 2016, Detroit was home to 675,480 people who owned an average of 1.15 vehicles per household.

Detroit Receiving Hospital has admitted more than 30 people per month each month since April for car accident injuries. May was a high, with 55 car injury patients.

Within Wayne County and Detroit, there are still far more cars than scooters; scooter companies in Detroit can only have 400 scooters each in the city. The city [told the Free Press in May](https://www.freepress.com/story/money/business/2019/05/09/its-scooter-season-again-detroit-but-some-prices-up/1140741001/) ([/story/money/business/2019/05/09/its-scooter-season-again-detroit-but-some-prices-up/1140741001/](https://www.freepress.com/story/money/business/2019/05/09/its-scooter-season-again-detroit-but-some-prices-up/1140741001/)) that the three companies here at the time (Bird, Spin and Lime) had not yet reached their combined 1,200-scooter cap.

Nationally, from late 2017 to June 2019, there were at least eight scooter deaths and 1,500 scooter injuries, Consumer Reports found.

A [2019 study from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](https://www.cdc.gov/eis/downloads/eis-conference-2019-508.pdf#page=110) (<https://www.cdc.gov/eis/downloads/eis-conference-2019-508.pdf#page=110>) surveyed 130 injured scooter riders, finding that 45% of their scooter injuries were head injuries. But the same study also projected that out of every 100,000 scooter rides, there were about 20 injuries.

While no Detroiters have died using a scooter, Klever said a scooter death is almost inevitable at this point.

"I do anticipate that in some point in time we will (see a scooter-related fatality)," Klever said. "It's not a matter of if, it's a matter of when, with the types and patterns of injuries we're seeing, that there will be a scooter-related fatality in Detroit."

The safety issue with scooters has a few different facets. Unlike riding a bike, riding an electric scooter is probably: a) a decision you'll make spontaneously and without a helmet in hand (though Boaz Bikes do often offer helmets), b) probably an option that's still novel or new to you and c) a pretty high-powered transportation method.

Scooters can also get up to relatively high speeds more quickly than a human-powered bike could — they're powerful, and people don't always know how to handle them, Klever said. Detroit, like many cities, has a 15-mph scooter speed limit; Lime and Bird scooters accelerate to just under that limit.

"There's definitely a more severe pattern of injury," Klever said of scooter accidents.

Another issue around scooter accidents? The insurance coverage.

User agreements for [Lime](https://www.li.me/user-agreement) (<https://www.li.me/user-agreement>), [Bird](https://www.spin.app/user-agreement), [Spin](https://www.spin.app/user-agreement) (<https://www.spin.app/user-agreement>) and [Boaz](https://www.boazbike.com/rental-waiver) (<https://www.boazbike.com/rental-waiver>), all have riders assume responsibility for accidents and injuries, freeing the companies from liability.

If you're in a car-scooter collision while you're riding, you'll be treated like a pedestrian, Hewitt said. But if you have any other kind of non-car-related scooter accident, you won't have as easy access to insurance.

"In order to access Michigan's no-fault benefits, you have to, unfortunately, have a motor vehicle involved, which probably means more serious injury," Hewitt said.

Klever said scooters themselves might become safer (with bigger wheels or more shock absorption) and riders might become more used to them, but he believes that even when they're no longer new, scooters are "more inherently dangerous than other forms of transportation."

"Cars are very very safe right now — I think they're so well regulated by the government — the multi-safety point airbags and the seat belt tensioners and crumple zones. ... Scooters, they're not regulated and I don't think they're necessarily safe," Klever said. "That doesn't mean they're not fun or you can't have a safe time on them ... people just need to understand their limitations."

Scooters can be a great tool for getting around if used correctly, Hewitt said. Here are Klever and Hewitt's tips for safe scooter use:

- Slow down. Remember the scooter is powerful, and use it on a low setting.
- When you can, use a helmet.
- Know your limits and get familiar with scooter use. Don't ride in congested or crowded spaces until you're very comfortable riding.

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