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Spring weather usually brings with it a flurry of outdoor activities to go along with the colorful flowers of all descriptions. One outdoor activity that has gained much popularity during the past few years is the use of ATV's or "all terrain vehicles".

It wasn't long ago that relatively few people owned an ATV. That has certainly changed. A best estimate today is that there are approximately seven million of these ATV's in use in the United States. While many of you may not actually ride ATV's, I'll bet that very few of you do not have friends, co-workers, children, grandchildren, or other family members who do ride.

Millions of people use ATV's every year without incident. Some, however, don't. Since 1982 more than 5,000 ATV-related deaths have been reported in the United States. Thousands of other accidents and injuries, some serious some minor, have also been reported. The under sixteen age group of users have experienced the highest rate of injuries among all groups, and surprisingly to me is the dramatic increase in the injuries to children under twelve years of age.

Does this mean that we should ban all use of ATV's and never ride? No, of course not! What it does mean is that we should take time to learn how to operate our ATV's in a safe and responsible manner and to make sure that our younger riders are also taught to ride safely and responsibly.

Some of the leading causes attributed to ATV accidents include improper rider protective gear (including the most obvious of all rider gear, your helmet), excessive speeds, riding double, crossing on slopes, and untrained (inexperienced) riders. Most, if not all, of these factors are rider oriented and can be prevented. Here are a few basic safety rules endorsed by the National 4-H Community ATV Safety Program, American Honda Motor Company, the National 4-H Council, and the Specialty Vehicle Institute of America.

The first rule is that all riders need to take a certified ATV riding course such as the one offered by the ATV Safety Institute (ASI). Their course is a fun way for both novice and experienced riders to learn the basics of how your ATV handles while starting, stopping, navigating obstacles, and turning. You will also learn many other valuable (and accident preventing)

skills. We have ASI instructors in our area who will be glad to set up a course for you or your rider group.

Always wear a helmet and other rider protective gear. It doesn't matter if you are taking your ATV for a long trail ride over rough terrain or simply moving it from your driveway to the storage shed. If you get on your machine put on rider safety gear. Recommended rider safety gear includes a helmet with face guard and chin strap (look for helmets with the DOT or Snell Foundation stickers). Other recommended rider gear includes eye goggles, long sleeved shirt, long pants, high topped boots or even better ATV rider boots, a chest protector, and kidney belt. Many, many injuries and deaths to both youth and adult riders can be prevented if you take time to put on these simple pieces of safety gear each and every time you get on your machine.

Ride only on approved unpaved locations. Paved surfaces are for cars, motorcycles, bikes, etc.....not for ATV's. ATV tires are made to grip dirt better, and they lose traction on gravel and paved surfaces making them harder to steer and to control.

Do not ride with passengers. Most ATV's are designed for one rider and one rider only. If you have additional riders, you cannot possibly know how they are going to move and subtle shifts can cause you to lose control. We always recommend youth riders to ride under the supervision of an adult but never with another rider on your ATV.

Learn how to control your ATV. Riding ATV's means making adult-like decisions (I know this may sometimes be a problem for us "grown-up kids"). Keep your speed low in order to handle unexpected obstacles that may pop up in your path. Remember your ATV is best controlled (and you are safest) when all four wheels are on the ground! Jumps, wheelies, and other stunts or tricks are very unsafe no matter how cool they have been made to look on tv.

Always ride with a clear head. It takes a lot of skill to operate an ATV. Alcohol and drugs do not mix with ATV's. Do not operate an ATV or allow anyone that you care about to operate an ATV in any impaired condition.

Ride an ATV that is appropriately sized for you! ASI guidelines recommend for riders between six and eleven years of age choose an ATV whose engine size is 70 cc's or less, for riders between twelve and fifteen up to 90 cc's, and for riders sixteen and older 90 cc's and up, keeping in mind that there are other factors to appropriately sizing an ATV than engine size. A great website to obtain more information about sizing your ATV and other aspects of ATV safety is [www.atv-youth.org](http://www.atv-youth.org) .

While following these simple rules for operating ATV's certainly does not eliminate the potential for accidents and injuries all together, they will make your experiences riding ATV's much safer. Walker County 4-H has formed an ATV Safety Club to emphasize safe ATV riding practices, for more information you can contact the Walker County Extension Office at 221-3392.