

Cycling and your health

Riding a bicycle, either freestanding or stationary, is an excellent form of exercise that improves your general health while being gentle on your joints. It offers variable resistance, from slow easy cycling to explosive sprints, which means people of all ages and fitness levels can benefit. It's also a great way to have fun, get fit and spend time with friends and family.

Regular cycling can help manage or prevent many disorders, including obesity, coronary heart disease and arthritis. This low impact form of exercise is a fuel-efficient way to get around, since it takes far less energy to cover one kilometre by bicycle than on foot. Perhaps this explains why the bicycle is such a popular form of transport throughout the world, with an estimated one billion people using bicycles every day.

Riding to work or to the shops is one of the most time-efficient ways to incorporate regular exercise into your everyday routine. You get your 'daily dose' without having to spend extra time at the gym.

The benefits of regular exercise

The human body was designed for movement. Research indicates that exercising for 30 minutes on most days can offer substantial benefits, even if those 30 minutes are broken up into two or three separate sessions. If you are over 40 years of age, overweight or haven't exercised regularly in a long time, it is important to see your doctor before you start any fitness program. The health benefits of regular exercise include:

- Increased cardiovascular fitness
- Increased muscle strength and flexibility
- Improved joint mobility
- Decreased stress levels
- Improved posture
- Strengthened bones
- Decreased body fat levels.

The muscles of the legs

The legs and buttocks do most of the work in cycling. The thigh is made up of two broad muscle groups. The quadriceps sit on the front of the thigh, starting at the pelvis and attaching to the knee joint. This muscle set straightens the leg.

The hamstrings are on the back of the thigh; they also start from the pelvis and attach to the knee. This muscle set bends the leg, helped out by the muscles of the buttocks (called the gluteal muscles), which also straighten the hip.

The muscles of the calf, the gastrocnemius and the soleus control the movements of the foot on the pedal, while the deep muscles of the calf act on the toes. Regular cycling improves leg strength and can often be used as a form of rehabilitation for certain leg injuries.

Hand cycling

Hand cycles are similar to three-wheeled recumbent bicycles, but they are powered with hand instead of foot pedals. Velcro straps can be used to secure the hands to the pedals if necessary. This style of bicycle allows amputees, people with spinal injuries and those recovering from certain conditions such as stroke to cycle as a form of exercise and recreation.

Improving your performance with food

If cycling is a regular part of your exercise routine, a few simple dietary adjustments could help improve your performance, including:

- Increase your daily intake of fresh fruits and vegetables.

- Make sure you eat foods like lean meats that provide good sources of protein for muscle building and repair.
- On long rides, consider packing a couple of high carbohydrate drinks or energy bars to help fuel you for longer.
- Make sure you pack plenty of water or sports drinks when you ride, to prevent dehydration.

Health hazards you can avoid

With preparation and common sense, you can avoid most - if not all - the potential health hazards of cycling. Be aware of these issues:

- **Safety awareness** - always wear a helmet and appropriate safety gear. Keep your bicycle in good repair. Make sure you are familiar with the road rules and follow them.
- **Dehydration** - the human body is mostly made up of water. Dehydration is serious and can be fatal. Avoid strenuous cycling on hot days, take plenty of liquids with you, and stop for frequent rest and drink breaks if you are doing a long ride.
- **Muscle injuries** - muscles and tendons are more susceptible to injury when they are cold. Always warm up with a series of gentle stretches. When you first start riding, take it easy and aim for a slow and steady increase in heart rate.
- **Sunburn** - don't forget to regularly reapply your sunscreen. Even waterproof varieties can be washed off with constant sweating.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Bicycle Victoria Tel. 1800 639 634
- 'Go for your life' Infoline service Tel. 1300 73 98 99

Things to remember

- Cycling is healthy and fun and can be enjoyed by people of all ages and fitness levels.
- The muscles most used in cycling are those of the buttocks, thighs and calves.
- With preparation and common sense, you can avoid most - if not all - the potential health hazards of cycling.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

Bicycle Victoria

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