

Cycling: Rolling your way to better health

By Natalie McGill

Some people choose to walk for fitness. Others may choose to run. But if you choose to roll, you may be one of many Americans who cycle toward better health.

Bicycling is a great source of aerobic fitness that works out a variety of muscles at one time, particularly the ones in the upper and lower parts of your legs, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.



People cycle for many reasons, says Kristine

Karlson, MD, an associate professor of community and family medicine and orthopedics at Dartmouth College's Geisel School of Medicine and a fellow of the American College of Sports Medicine.

Cycling can be an alternative to driving. People may turn to cycling if they have joint pain or injuries related to overusing muscles in other physical activity, Karlson says.



For more bicycling tips, visit www.acsm.org

"A lot of people who take up cycling are actually injured runners," Karlson says. "They have had knee problems. They've had foot or ankle problems. Then they discover cycling as an alternative...so we see a lot of folks start cycling in their 40s and 50s. Otherwise, people might choose to start cycling for a variety of reasons: because their friends are doing it, because they can take their kids with them."

Cycling carries the benefits from most types of aerobic activity, Karlson says. Benefits of physical activity include stronger muscles and bones, a lower risk of chronic illness, including cardiovascular disease, and a lower risk of mental health issues and sleep problems, according to CDC.

Cycling can also keep you connected socially. Joining a club or meet-up group that cycles is similar to the social interactions you'd get from signing up for an exercise class.

"People say, 'Hey, where were you? Missed you on the ride the other day,'" Karlson says. "They end up with social gatherings after a bike ride for a meal or at a bakery or something like that. So there are lots of social benefits to getting together."

If you're thinking of cycling regularly, talk to your health

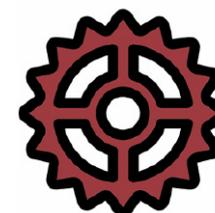
care provider about the benefits and any possible physical health risks that could prevent you from doing it safely.

Once cleared by a health professional, make sure to get help from experienced riders and bicycle shop owners familiar with cycling so that your bike suits your physical needs.



There are several types of bicycles, such as road bicycles adapted for cycling on paved roads and mountain bikes that are better for hills and terrain, according to the American College of Sports Medicine. A bad bicycle fit could lead to overuse injuries, Karlson says.

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If you're new to cycling, it may take some time to adjust to riding your bike. Starting out with shorter rides, for as little as 15 minutes, for example, can help you adapt as you slowly

advance to taking longer rides.

Practicing cycling safety is also important. Wear a well-fitted helmet that isn't tipped back on your head and make sure the strap is tight under your chin. And be sure to outfit your bike with front and rear reflectors and wear reflective clothing so other cyclists, pedestrians and vehicles can see you.

Karlson stressed the importance of being alert, ditching headphones on your ride and following the rules of the road, such as learning hand signals to communicate your turns and avoid crashes.



"Cycling injuries can be catastrophic," Karlson says. "We hear about people getting hit by cars and falling off their bikes with serious injury. They have to pretend that they're a car and follow those rules and not cross traffic and not make sudden turns that are unexpected."



Going recumbent: Bicycling on your back

While most bikes require you to lean forward, you may have seen some where the riders lean back and extend their legs to pedal. Those are recumbent bikes. A recumbent bicycle is lower to the ground and geared toward riders who may have issues such as neck and shoulder pain using a traditional bike, Karlson says.

"They really are for the person who really enjoys being out on a bike but finds that they can't because of some typically back-related skeletal problem," Karlson says.

Karlson says a recumbent bike is typically not a choice for first-time cyclists as they take some time to learn how to balance. She also cautions that they may be harder for motorists to see, so they're not ideal for using with regular street traffic.



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