

TTIPS VOL. 20/22 – INSIGHTS LOWER BACK PAIN

I love bicycling. My whole family loves bicycling. We like it so much that when we travel, we take our bikes with us - especially when visiting family. Even my 97-year old grandmother started bicycling. She started a few years ago, and rides ten miles a day – now we don't know where the heck she is!

INTRODUCTION

At a recent neighborhood social event one of my neighbors approached me and mentioned that she frequently sees me riding around the neighborhood on my bike. When these friendly interactions occur, the recruiter in me comes alive. I usually will encourage folks who are not riders to take up the sport, and recruit those who are riders to join KABC.

This person said she would like to do both, but that bicycling inevitably made her lower back sore. That is not uncommon. I frequently hear new and experienced cyclists talk about lower back pain that is induced by bike riding. I explained to her that lower back pain is normal when starting, but that there are measures one can take to prevent pain and eliminate existing pain.

Maybe some of you are in the same place. I thought that this issue might be a good one to discuss in this column, so I found a brief discussion of simple measures you can do on your own without going to a gym or hiring an expert to help you. Obviously, if your lower back has been injured in the past, as mine has, you might want to talk to a doctor to understand whether that injury is playing a role in your pain before you do anything about it. If not, here are a few insights that might help you get rid of that sore back.

Lower Back Pain Doesn't Have to Keep You From Riding

IF YOU FEEL YOUR BACK ACHING WHILE PEDALING, TRY THESE REMEDIES

BY LAUREL LEICHT APR, 2022 / BICYCLING.COM

Chances are pretty good you've experienced back pain at some point or other: A quarter of adults say they've been sidelined with lower back pain within the past three months, according to the CDC. Chances are even higher if you're a cyclist.

Yes, miles and miles on the bike means you're keeping everything from your cardiovascular system to your quads in tip-top shape. It also means you're spending hours and hours hunched over the handlebars while you do so.

"The biggest reason people have lower back pain, especially cyclists, is they get tightness in the muscles in their anterior hip—their quads and hip flexors—mostly from sitting," says Brian Gurney, D.P.T., C.S.C.S., a trainer, board-certified sports clinical specialist, and physical therapist at BeFit Therapy in New York City.

Of course, biking tons of miles is a lot better for you than slumping at a desk, but you're actually still in a seated position the entire time. "That posture pulls your pelvis forward and creates a lot of tension in your lower back muscles. When you get tight in the hips, your glutes stop working like they should. So, it's twofold: tightness on the front, weakness in the back."

The good news is, you don't have to just accept a nagging back as part of your everyday routine. Even better, you don't have to crack open the painkillers to kick it. Best yet: You don't have to let it sideline you from your regular rides. "Most cyclists will feel lower back pain at some point, especially during hills—but you can continue cycling if the pain is intermittent and resolves after cycling," says Peter J. Moley, M.D., a physiatrist at the Hospital for Special Surgery in NYC.

5 Ways to Address Lower Back Pain on the Bike

Check Your Fit

You likely got your bike properly fitted to your body when you bought it. Even so, pain is a good nudge to go visit a pro again. "Most low back pain on bikes is related to the lumbar discs—the load on the joints of the back is reduced, but disc loads are increased, especially at the lower two lumbar discs," explains Moley. "A correct bicycle fit is very important. Seat height, crank arm length, and saddle fore and aft [or where your seat is placed] can all help to make a more comfortable ride."

You may be tempted to just inch the handlebars up a bit yourself, and that could help with the pain if you're pedaling safely in place on a trainer. But for all outdoor rides, and just in general,

it's crucial to have an experienced bike fitter make necessary and correct adjustments, at each check point of your bike.

Roll It Out When You Can

Along with stretching, spending some quality time with a good ol' foam roller can work wonders on your aching back too. "Mobility in the spine and lower limbs is helpful for the cyclist to reduce stress to the low back," says Moley.

To pinpoint your personal mobility issues, Gurney suggests taking a video of yourself riding on the trainer and having a physical therapist analyze it and prescribe you moves. But a few places that most all cyclists could benefit from self-massaging, he says, include your quads and IT band (both best tackled with a foam roller) and your psoas (a major hip flexor muscle, which you can loosen up better with a smaller tool like a lacrosse ball).

Stretch Before and After

The first part of fixing the pain in your back is loosening up the tightness in your front. Child's pose and cat-cow are great moves for cyclists to incorporate to counteract that constant C-shape you're in while riding, says Todd Sinett, founder of Tru Whole Care in NYC and creator of the Backbridge.

Gurney's favorite stretch tackles two tight spots at once – loosen up your quads and hip flexors with a wall stretch. To do it, start facing away from a wall. Get into a kneeling position, right foot in front and left foot behind. Place your left knee as close to the wall as you can, leg kicked up so top of left foot is pressing into the wall. Hold 30 to 60 seconds, then repeat on opposite side.

Focus On Strength Building

Because tight anterior muscles often leave you with weak glutes, those huge muscles are the first ones you want to target when it comes to strength training. Gurney recommends starting by adding hip thrusts into your routine; they're great for firing up your glutes and your hamstrings. To do it, sit facing away from a chair, bench, or couch, which should line up with the bottom of your shoulder blades or just above that. Bend knees, plant feet, and place arms on top of the chair, bench, or couch. Drive through feet to lift hips, squeezing glutes as you go. Avoid arching back and make sure knees bend 90 degrees at the top. Keep chin down. Lower hips back down and repeat.

Hip tightness and glute weakness also means your core has to work harder to keep you stable, so core-stability moves like plank variations and dead bugs should help too.

Take a Break When You Need It

All this being said, no matter how much you're doing to prevent and correct back pain, sometimes you may need to give in to a little extra R&R. How to know if the ache is serious enough to take a step back? Listen to your body, especially the next day. "Cyclists should be concerned if the back pain persists the day after riding or if the back symptoms are associated with pain running down one or both legs," advises Moley. "And if you're experiencing any weakness, you should definitely see a doctor."

Alright riders, that's it for this week. Hope you have a fun and pain-free week on your bike. If you see my grandmother out there, please tell her that dinner is ready and to come on home.

Make Every Ride Epic,

Darryl