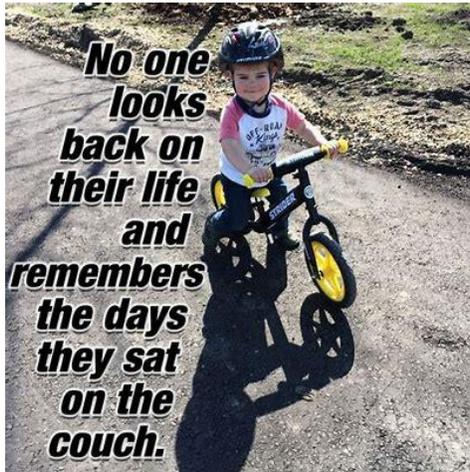


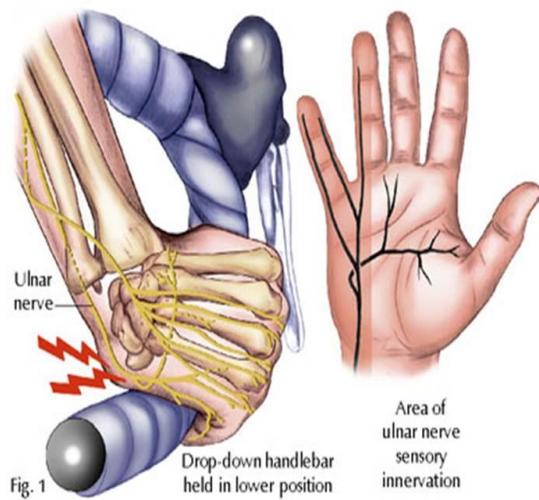
TTIPS VOL. 31/22 – INSIGHTS HAND NUMBNESS



Introduction

Every Saturday during our group ride I see fellow riders shaking out their hands at some point along the route because of hand numbness. It happened to me on my last ride. It seems to mostly effect my left hand. Does this happen to you? If so, you know how annoying it can be. Not only is it annoying, but it can be unsafe because it causes you to ride with one hand on the handlebars while you “shake out” the other, or worse, your hand is so numb that you can’t properly operate your brakes and shifters.

Why are your hands going numb? Well, for most of us, it’s because we are putting excessive pressure on the ulnar nerve where it runs through the hand. This nerve runs down your arm, through the Cubital Tunnel in your elbow, into your wrist, and then through the large fleshy pad on the outside of your hands (see figure 1 below). In bike riding, especially for those of you who use drop bars (most road bikes), there are several opportunities for this nerve to become pinched or compressed.



What should you do? Well first, if it's happening repeatedly, don't ignore it because it can lead to a chronic condition. Second, check your posture as you ride: if your elbows are "locked," consider bending them slightly. Many of us ride with straight arms, with our elbows "locked" which potentially causes a few other problematic issues. That's a subject for another article, but for now, consider adding a slight bend at the elbow so that you are not binding on the ulnar nerve at the elbow. Third, check your "fit" as it pertains to your hands. Here are the seven most frequent causes of hand numbness for bike riders.

SEVEN MOST FREQUENT SOURCES OF BIKE RIDER HAND NUMBNESS

1. Handlebars too wide
2. "Reach" too long
3. Saddle set back
4. Saddle tilt
5. Saddle height
6. Saddle selection
7. Crank length

I want to emphasize, as I have in previous articles in this series, that your "fit" to your bike, is extremely important. If your hands are going numb during bike rides, there very likely is a problem with your fit. Ideally, you enlisted the assistance of a professional bike fitter to achieve a good fit. Below, I will point out the most common problems associated with numb hands. If you feel that one or more of these may be causing an issue for you, you might wish to make some minor adjustments on your own, or you might otherwise go back to your fitter and explain to him/her your issue and ask them to take a look. My purpose here is just to point out common causes, and help you decide whether you have an issue, and then pinpoint where it might be. Bicycle fit is a matter of achieving a proper balance among many variables. If you change one variable you may impact another, so do so cautiously.

Let's take a look at each cause in turn.

1. Handlebars Too Wide

Ideally, in the riding position your arms and hands would grip your handlebars at a position where your hands would be the roughly same distance apart from each other as the width of your shoulders. Think about it, when you are standing up, your arms and hands hang naturally beneath your shoulders. You don't walk around with them extending outward, angled away from your body. So why would you angle them away on your handlebars? One reason would be is that your handlebars make you do that. That is: you are gripping your handlebars where your hands are supposed to, right? Well, yeah, but, most bikes are sold with handlebars that are 16.5 inches/42 centimeters wide, not necessary measured to your proportions. They are meant to fit the "average person." That does not mean that they will fit you properly.

If handlebars are too wide, a rider will naturally tend to roll their wrists inward to align their wrists and elbows with their shoulders. Doing so may compress the ulnar nerve and over time trigger numbness or uncomfortable tingling in the hands

2. "Reach" is Too Long

We've all seen it.....a rider who looks like they are doing a "plank" on their bike. They are laid out so far that they appear to be reaching for their handlebars. Excessive reach can result in prolonged pressure on the ulnar nerve. To fix it, you can adjust the tilt of the handlebars or raise the stem a bit.

3. Saddle Setback

If the saddle is too far back relative to the handlebars, a rider will naturally lean forward as they ride placing excessive weight on their hands. As a general rule, when riding at tempo (not full out, but not slowly either) about 75 percent of weight should be supported by the pelvis and 25 percent by the hands. When riding harder at tempo, technically you could release the handlebars and your torso would remain in the same position. Don't try this unless you are in a safe place, with smooth asphalt, and no motor traffic around, and you are comfortable riding with no hands. If you do try it, and your torso falls forward as you release your grip. Your saddle may be set back too far.

4. Saddle Tilt

Some of us ride with the saddle tilted forward slightly so that when we are in "the drops" (lowest grip position on the bars) our saddle is not pressing unduly on other parts of our anatomy. There is nothing wrong with this so long as the tilt is not excessive. If the tilt is excessive, the rider will tend to slide forward and downward in the direction of the tilt,

increasing weight on their hands, and thus compressing the ulnar nerve. The simple fix is to push the nose of the seat back toward level until you find a happy medium.

5. Saddle Height

Simple. Excessive saddle height causes the rider to lean forward throwing excessive weight toward the hands. If the saddle needs to be higher to accommodate proper leg position relative to the pedals, consider raising the handlebars accordingly.

6. Saddle Selection

In a separate article in this series, we discussed the importance of saddle selection. Simply put, if the saddle is not properly fitted, or is otherwise just not comfortable, we tend to slide forward toward the nose of the saddle to find that comfort which can....you guessed it....place excessive weight on the hands

7. Crank Length

The cranks are the two levers that are connected to your pedals. Did you know that they come in different lengths? Yep. And there is much discussion in the cycling world about how different lengths can make you better, faster, more comfortable, etc.. Changing crank length will necessitate a change in saddle height, and thus can affect hand position. Well, I wouldn't recommend changing your cranks without talking first to a fitter. But if you have exhausted all other possibilities and continue to experience numbing or tingling, you might take a look at crank length.

Okay riders, see you next time. Until then,

Make Every Ride Epic,

Darryl