

SPIN DOCTOR'S

GUIDE TO PAINLESS CYCLING

by Ben Pearl, D.P.M



If you have chosen cycling as your main sporting activity, you will be pleased to know that next to swimming, it is one of the least damaging high aerobic demand sports. Nevertheless, there are a few chronic injury syndromes that can occur while riding. Many of these problems can be avoided if you take a few minutes before and after you ride with an appropriate warm up and stretching regimen. This is critical if you are undergoing a fast-paced workout or hammering the hills.

The ideal stretching conditions are when your body is warmed up, which can be accomplished with some light riding or jogging. The reason you warm up is to get blood moving to your extremities so that you can stretch more effectively. The muscles I recommend that cyclists stretch include the calves (gastrocnemius), the front upper leg muscles (quadriceps), the back upper leg muscles (hamstrings), and outer hip muscles (tensor fascia latae). There are many running and fitness books which have excellent diagrams of the proper stretches. Stretching after a workout is important because of the shortening which occurs after a muscle has been vigorously contracted in physical activity.

One of the more common problems cyclists experience is knee pain. Often the knee is involved because of an imbalance occurring above or below the knee joint. Other problems include muscle imbalances, excess motion in one or more joints, and leg length discrepancies. A cycling orthotic can be made to compensate for many of these problems.

Not only can an orthotic decrease injuries but it can improve performance. This is accomplished by filling the dead space between your arch and the insole of your shoe so that energy is transferred directly to your pedal and not lost inside the cleat. An example of an imbalance which may be corrected is building lift on one side of an orthotic if there is leg length discrepancy. As a general rule, I usually compensate for half the difference of the discrepancy. Another problem that can be addressed is excess motion which can cause knee or arch pain. By placing a cant into a prescription for an orthotic, this force can be decreased.

Another area that cyclists can encounter is numbness and burning where the groin interfaces with the saddle. This is usually due to pressure against the pudendal nerve in the pelvis. There are bicycle saddles made with areas of gel padding built in that will usually relieve the problem. Other saddles are made specifically for female riders to address their wider pelvis.

Muscle imbalances are a potential problem area that can plague your cycling. This happens commonly with the bigger front thigh muscles (quadriceps) overpowering the hamstrings or the calf muscles overpowering the front muscles in the lower leg. A muscle strength and flexibility evaluation can identify these problems. Consult a sports medicine specialist if these initial steps do not resolve your discomfort.

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