

ON YOUR **bike**

Whether you take to the road or cycle on a stationary bike, make the most of your workout with our guide

WORDS ANNA-LOUISE BOUVIER
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If you are already one of the passionate people who wake at dawn on weekends, slip into a lycra suit and grab a state-of-the-art carbon-fibre bike to join the pods of cyclists from a local cycling club for a beautiful two-hour ride, finishing with a latte in an outdoor cafe, this article is not really for you.

But if your knees and ankles are no longer coping with your walking regime, it's too cold to go to the pool or you have decided, like a huge number of Australians, that you are going to ditch the car and ride to work or around town, here are some ideas about what to look for when buying a bike, which bits of your body could cause problems, how to get the most out of your muscles, and a stack of other useful tips and ideas.

In 2007, the *Australian Bureau of Statistics Report of Participation in Sports and Physical Recreation* found the most popular activities Australians over 15 participated in regularly were walking (25 per cent or almost one-quarter of the population), aerobics/fitness at 13 per cent (more popular with women), swimming at 9 per cent (more popular with men) and cycling at 6 per cent. This means more than 1 million Australians a year regularly ride a bike.

A 2005 report commissioned by Bicycle Industries Australia to try to get a snapshot of the retail market for bike sales found the number of bicycles sold each year for



Before you START

This five minute routine is the best way to warm up for your ride.

→ SHOULDER ROLLS

Loosen your neck by gently rolling your shoulders backwards in circles five times.

→ CHEST STRETCH

Interlock your fingers and stretch your hands in front of you, palms away from you. Move your arms up over your head and feel your trunk stretch. Hold for five breaths.

→ BUTTOCK STRETCH

Sit on a chair and put your left ankle on your right knee. Gently hinge your body forward, keeping your chest up, until you feel a stretch in the buttock of the leg you have up. Hold each side for five breaths.

→ HIP STRETCH

Bend down and place your hands either side of your feet. Bend knees if necessary. Take right leg back as far as you can until you feel a stretch in the front of your right thigh. Slowly drop your right knee until 5cms from the floor. Repeat other side.

Rules for beginners

Get your confidence

If you haven't ridden for a long time, try to find an area that has a dedicated bike path, with no cars. This will help you get your balance and regain your "feel" for the bike.

Don't grip the handlebars too hard

We do this subconsciously to try to make ourselves more stable by using our neck girdle muscles, but what it tends to do is make you stiffer and less responsive and can result in you coming home from your ride with a very stiff neck.

Picture your trunk

staying as still as possible with only your legs moving. This has the effect of activating your core muscles, which will help make you more efficient and more stable.

Don't slump onto the handlebars

This will turn

off your core and put a lot of pressure on your neck.

Pedal in circles — don't push down. This will get you using your buttock muscles more efficiently.

Stretch before you start

This is the equivalent of taking the handbrake off your body before you want it to go. Check out the terrific bike-specific stretches at the end of this article.

Stay hydrated Cycling is very aerobically challenging, so keep a water bottle with you to replace lost fluids.

Start easy Try to pedal on lower gears with higher cadences. That way, you are teaching your muscles about the rhythm and sequencing of cycling without stressing them too much. If you are struggling to push too hard, you will start compensating



with all the other muscles of your body and risk sustaining an injury.

Keep feet straight

Imagine your feet are in railway tracks. Don't let your toes turn in or out as this will affect the position of your knees and put strain on your hips.

Beware of car doors

One of the biggest dangers for cyclists is from people opening car doors without checking behind to see if there is anything in the cycle lane. Always look to see if there is anyone in a parked car and try to pre-empt any problems.

the previous four years had averaged 1.133 million a year. This was a rise of 30 per cent a year on the previous four years.

Interestingly, while you might think it's mainly a pastime for children, adult bike sales were higher than children's bike sales both in number and value, with the average kids' BMX costing about \$252, while the average adult road bike (think sporty guy in matching outfit and helmet) was \$2200.

When the researchers looked at the data, Victoria and Western Australia had the greatest percentage of sales and this seemed to reflect those states' long-term investment in infrastructure to encourage cycling. More recently, many other regions of Australia have started to encourage bike riding as an

excellent activity not only from a health point of view, but from an environmental one, too. For example, the City of Sydney recently released a Cycling Strategy Action plan that sets a target to raise to 20 per cent by 2016 the number of cycling trips between 2km and 20km.

Modern bikes are highly specialised and customised. The choice can be overwhelming. It's not like the good old days when all a girl could dream of was a lime-green dragster with a pink, yellow and orange floral seat and ribbons swirling out of the enormously tall handlebars. (That these machines of glory were impossibly exhausting to ride was completely irrelevant!) These days, any good bike store will ask you a number of questions to determine what style of bike would be good for you. As a starting point, here are the four main categories of bikes you will see.

THE ROAD BIKE If you are one of those lycra-clad riders, this is probably the style of bike you have: ultra-light with a stiff frame, narrow tyres, dropped handlebars (which are often lower than the saddle) and fewer gears. These are basically designed for speed, not comfort.

THE TOURING BIKE If you love cycling so much you are taking off for a world cycling trip, this is the bike you need. They look a lot like road bikes but are slightly stronger, can carry a little more load and are often a slightly different shape to give a bit of extra comfort.

THE MOUNTAIN BIKE Decided the great outdoors are for you and can see yourself off-road on dirt tracks and trails? This is your kind of conveyance. They have big, fat tyres with lots of grip to stop you careering down the trails as well as big, wide handlebars and lots of gears. They're easy to ride even if you live in a city and your main time is spent on urban roads.

THE HYBRID These are generally more upright, though many look a lot like mountain bikes. They are usually lighter but still very stable. A hybrid is probably an ideal starting point for most people who have decided to start cycling. However, the range is incredible and you should really talk to the staff at the bike shop about what you need.

A good bike store will also be able to assess how your body type would suit a certain bike. For example, if your legs are really long and your arms are really short,



Hints from an Olympic physiotherapist

Trish Wisbey-Roth has toured with Australian Cycling for 10 years to national, international and Olympic events. She was also the headquarters physiotherapist for the 2000 Australian Olympic. She has found that one of the most important things when you start riding is to make sure you have the right bike, with the right heights and positions for your body shape. Some of the most common problems she sees include:

→ **SEAT IS TOO HIGH** You have to push down harder through your ankles and toes, making the calves work too hard and the hamstrings work less efficiently. This can lead to pain and problems.

→ **SEAT IS TOO FAR FORWARD** This can place too much load on the quadriceps, which in turn can lead to knee pain.

→ **HANDLEBARS ARE TOO LOW** This is particularly a problem if your

thoracic spine (between your neck and waist) is stiff because most of the day you sit at a computer. The low bars mean you are likely to suffer neck pain when you ride as your neck resembles a turtle with the hinge between the stiff upper back and the neck lifting up to see where you are going.

If you have any pain or problems when riding, first go back to the bike shop and make sure your bike is

adjusted correctly. Then see your local physiotherapist as you may need specific stretches to balance any tight or weak muscles.

If you are a serious cyclist, there are physios and cycling experts who do specialist biomechanical assessments. Wisbey-Roth videos clients on their bikes and digitally assesses them from all sides. (Contact her at Take Control Physio 02 9570 7800 www.bbclasses.com.au)

you may have difficulty with a bike that has a very long distance between the wheels, even if you do love the colour. The store will also adjust your seat and handlebar height and, in the case of some state-of-the-art road bikes, may actually customise the whole frame.

If you're thinking about buying a bike to get a Tour de France body, just be aware that to develop one of those amazing bottoms, you will need a road or touring bike, as the angle of the hip relative to the spine encourages the gluteals (bottom muscles) to work very hard. This is also good if you have knee problems, as strong glutes will take the load off your knee.

However, the low bar position can put a strain on an older neck, so you may want to use the "hoods" (upper bars you can rest on to keep you more upright) to take the load.

The more upright you are on your bike, as with most hybrids, the more you will use your quadriceps muscles (at the front of your legs), so this is great for getting rid of cottage cheese thighs! Unfortunately, not so good for blancmange buttocks, but it can keep the load off your neck.

Kids and bikes

Apart from compulsory head gear, I could not find any uniform national regulations regarding riding to school in Australia, though the National Travel Smart initiative has cycling as one of its priorities, coupled with encouraging kids to walk to school.

I did find an excellent resource pamphlet called *Bicycle Safety — What every parent should know*, which can be downloaded from an American website, www.activelivingresources.org. This has a series of great cartoons with step-by-step advice on things to consider when getting your child prepared to ride the streets.

This resource has some great tips to help children become more proficient and safer riders (such as teaching them how to look behind without swerving the handlebars). One of the best tips is making sure they chose their helmet themselves so they feel it is cool enough to wear!

The Bicycle Safety brochure says the three most common reasons for children's bike accidents are:

The driveway ride-out This is where the child is riding on a footpath and a car reverses out of a driveway.

Running the stop sign Ten per cent of all bike accidents occur because children ignore stop signs. The average age for this kind of accident is 11.

Turning without looking In their determination to get where they are going, children often forget to check for traffic. ♦

*Anna-Louise Bouvier is a Sydney-based physiotherapist. Her practice, **Physiocise**, teaches posture and movement education classes for bad backs and aching bodies.*

www.physiocise.com.au



→ **YOUR SEAT POSITION** The ideal seat height is when you can extend your leg until the sole of your foot is parallel with the floor and your knee is only slightly bent. If your knees ache on the bike, your seat is probably too low.

→ **HOW MUCH TENSION?** The most common mistake people make is to put too much tension on the wheel so their legs give up before they have had a good cardio workout. Keep the tension light when you start and pedal a bit faster. Aim for about 20 minutes in total. If you bounce out of the seat, the tension is too light.

→ **YOUR POSTURE** Don't simply slump over and grab the bars. Sit evenly in your seat, lift your chest and fold forward from the hips (without letting your back sway) until your hands lightly grasp the bars. Keep your elbows and hands soft. This will make you use your core and bottom more. Start pedalling and don't wobble. Don't read — it drops your eyes, which drops your head, which will tend to make you slump, which then turns off your core.

→ **SPIN CLASSES** Spin bikes are great for getting your bottom working. If you have never done a class before you start, practise standing up and down in the seat so you get a feel for this balance position. This is an exhausting cardio workout. As the class progresses, your form will start to fall apart ... gripping hands, wobbling bottom, collapsing chest. Don't try to keep up with everyone at first. Build up gradually.