

Fitness can be as easy as putting pedal to the mettle

by R.J. Ignelzi

Still trying to make good on your New Year's resolution to get more exercise? We're more than a month into 2007, so what's holding you back? Not sure what you should do? Don't know how to do it? Unsure of how to start?

To get your body off the sofa and into motion, fitness experts offer tips on proper form, required equipment, injury prevention and other vital information to give you the biggest bang for your workout buck.

Road cycling is a great way to pump up the cardiovascular system and have some fun.

No matter if you're on a solo spin along backcountry roads, pedaling with pals on an organized ride or using your bike as a healthy mode of transportation, cycling can be a fitness adventure.

CYCLING PRIMER

Fitness experts: Todd Galati, kinesiologist and personal trainer for the American Council on Exercise, is a cycling tour leader and a former road and mountain bike racer, and Mike Olson, a former racing cyclist, owns three Trek Bicycle Superstores in San Diego County.

HEALTH/FITNESS BENEFITS:

- Cycling is a great cardiovascular exercise, increasing heart and lung strength. It burns calories, decreases

body fat and is easy on the joints. It also provides some lower-body resistance training. Cycling outdoors is a great stress reliever.

- Calories burned: The faster you pedal and the more hills you ride, the more calories you'll burn. For a 150-pound person, in 30 minutes: Bicycling 10 mph, a leisurely pace, burns about 143 calories. Bicycling 12 to 14 mph, a moderate effort, burns about 286 calories. Bicycling 16 to 19 mph, a vigorous effort on varied terrain, burns about 429 calories.

WHO BENEFITS?

- Cycling is good for people who want to get a cardio workout without pounding their joints. It's the perfect exercise for someone who is overweight or has minor injuries. It's also a great cross-training activity for runners or swimmers.

- Cycling is good for anyone who enjoys the outdoors and likes the fact that it's also a mode of transportation.

WHO SHOULD AVOID CYCLING?

- Bicycling is not a good activity for someone with balance problems, although three-wheeled bikes are available.

- It may also be difficult for someone with neck or shoulder injuries to ride a bike comfortably, because you need to be able to lift up and turn the head and neck while riding.

GETTING STARTED

BIKE-MINDED - Dave Thile rides his bike about 100 miles a week in San Diego County. Here he enjoys an early morning spin along the coast. CNS Photo by Howard Lipin. **BIKING BASICS** - Here is what you need to get started in recreational bicycling. CNS Photo by Howard Lipin.- If you're just getting up off the sofa after months of inactivity, start with a 20- to 30-minute ride three times a week. Each week, increase the duration by about 10 percent to 15 percent. While you'll get health benefits riding just 30 minutes, your ultimate goal should be to ride one hour or longer three times a week or more often.

- If you've got a bike, but it's gone unused for some time, take it to a bike shop to get it checked out to make sure the brakes, gears and tires are in good working order. If you need a bike, see below.

- A beginners' bicycling class may help with riding and safety basics. Also, by participating in group rides, you can pick up cycling pointers from more experienced riders. (Group rides are posted in newspapers, fitness magazines, on cycling Web sites and in bike shops).

HOW TO PROGRESS AND ADD CHALLENGE

- You'll see the most improvement in your fitness level if you occasionally do a ride that is 25 percent to 30 percent longer than your normal rides. Try to get in one or two longer rides - 75 minutes to two hours - every week.

- Two other cycling fitness boosters are hills and speed. After you're able to comfortably ride on flat terrain for 30 to 40 minutes, add some hills to your biking route. You can also add short bursts of speed into the ride to pump up the heart rate.

- For added intensity, occasionally try an indoor cycling class to supplement your outdoor rides.

REMAINING MOTIVATED

- Having friends to ride with can add to the pleasure of cycling.
- As you become more experienced, aim for longer, more-challenging rides.
- Consider joining a bicycling club.

PROPER FORM

- To get and maintain proper cycling form and posture, you need to have your bicycle adjusted for your body. A bike fitting is free when you purchase a bike from a bike shop.
- If you're using a bike that hasn't been adjusted in a long time or was adjusted for someone other than you, spend the \$50 to \$100 to get it fitted from the pros at a bike shop.

- Your weight should be equally balanced on the seat and pedals, so you don't have to hold yourself up on the handlebars, which contributes to a sore neck and back. When you lean forward, lean from the hips and avoid rounding the back. Your knees shouldn't have to lock to reach the pedals. If one pedal is at 6 o'clock, your knee should be at about a 25-degree bend.

ROUTES AND SURFACES

- Beginner cyclists should look for bike routes with minimal auto traffic and wide bike lanes.

- As you become a more confident and experienced cyclist, you can take to the roads, preferably ones with designated bike lanes.

- In most states, bicycles are subject to the same laws as cars and should ride with traffic.

BUYING A BIKE

- Unless you know exactly the kind of bike you want or need, it's best to buy one from a bike shop with experienced sales personnel who can help you find one to fit your body.

- Bike frames are available in steel (least expensive), aluminum and titanium and carbon fiber (most expensive). Look for a bike with at least 27 gears or speeds.

- Count on spending at least \$500 to \$600 for your first bicycle. Make sure the bicycle comes with at least a one-year warranty and that the shop offers a service and maintenance agreement.

HELMET

- In nearly every locale, a helmet is mandatory for most minors and strongly recommended for adult riders. Check your local laws or visit the Bicycle Helmet Safety Institute, www.helmets.org. A helmet should sit level on your head, not tilted back. The strap should fit snugly so the helmet tightens when you open your mouth and tugging in any direction doesn't loosen the strap or tilt the helmet.

- Replace the helmet if you crash and hit your head.

- The pricier helmets weigh less and have more vents, but the less-expensive ones are just as protective. Look for a sticker that says the helmet has passed the American National Standard Institute testing.

- Cost: \$30 to \$200.

GLOVES

- Leather, palm-padded gloves absorb vibrations and can protect your hands if you fall.

- Cost: \$10 to \$20.

SHOES

- Beginning cyclists don't need shoes that clip to the pedals, but as you become more advanced, your performance will benefit from cycling shoes.

- Bicycle shoes that feature a stiff sole don't allow the foot to flex, so all the energy is forced into the pedal.

- Cost: \$60 to \$200.

SEAT

- Although your bike comes with a seat, or saddle, you may want to replace it with one that's more comfortable for you.

- Some seats feature gel pads for more cushioning. Others have cutouts in the center, and a few are ultrawide.

- Cost: \$30 to \$100.

WATER BOTTLE

- Make sure you have a bottle cage attached to your bike to hold your water bottle.

- Cost: \$10 for bottle and cage.

SUNGLASSES

- Polycarbonate shades can protect your eyes from glare, bugs and debris.

- Cost: \$40 to \$200.

CYCLING CLOTHING

- Cycling shorts and jerseys (\$30 to \$100 each) wick moisture from the body to keep you dry. The shorts are tighter and designed not to bunch so they help prevent chafing. They're also padded in the right places.

- Biking jerseys are usually brightly colored, so traffic can easily see you, and have multiple handy pockets and zippers to store keys, phones and food.

APPROPRIATE STRETCHES

- For the first five or 10 minutes, ride easily to loosen up muscles and joints. After your ride, stretch the quadriceps, hip flexors, hamstrings, lower and upper back.

TIPS TO AVOID INJURY

- Ride with traffic as far to the right as practical, use hand signals and follow all traffic laws and signs.

- Wear brightly colored clothing and a helmet. Always carry a form of identification.

- Never ride too close to parked cars, where an opening door can cause a collision.

- Cyclists who ride after dark should equip their bicycles with flashing red taillights and white headlights.

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