

For Your Health

Prevent Common Cycling Injuries

Cycling as a form of exercise can be relatively free of stress injuries that are associated with other activities. Cycling doesn't pound the cartilage in the joints, so a strenuous 45-minute ride can work the heart and lungs just as hard as an equal period of running - without the bone jarring effects.

But cyclists who spend a lot of time hunched over their handlebars and continually pedaling can develop a host of muscle and joint problems, particularly in the legs, hands and back. A few of the most common injuries are:

- A degeneration of cartilage behind the kneecap caused by using inappropriately high gears or by overextending the knee because the seat is too high.
- Achilles tendinitis caused by side-to-side movement of the ankle or by simple overexertion.
- Numbness in the hands from excessive pressure on the nerves in that area.
- Muscle strains in the hamstrings, quadriceps and lower back.

In cycling, as in any other type of exercise, muscles and joints must be loose before they can move as they should. Proper stretching can help ease or prevent most common cycling ailments.

Start and finish rides with a stretching routine that includes back stretches (lie on your back and bring your knees up to your chest while your lower back remains flat), Achilles tendon stretches (place one foot behind you and lean against a wall, keeping both heels flat on the ground) and hamstring stretches (with one leg extended in front of you, lean forward from your hips and attempt to touch your toes).

Remember to change your position frequently while you ride. Shift the pressure from one hand to the other to decrease numbness in the hands and sit up straight periodically to rest your back.

Physical therapists are specialists in caring for aches and pains, and can tailor exercise programs specifically designed to prevent recurring injuries associated with cycling.