Get Your Health in Gear: 8 Reasons to Ride a Bike Today

We all know that once you learn to ride a bike you never forget, but if your trusty 10-speed is gathering dust, you may have forgotten how good you feel after cycling.

According to Dr. Thomas Best, a sports medicine physician with the University of Miami Health System, there’s plenty of science to back that up. “Cycling is a low-impact, accessible way to improve health. Simply put, exercise is good medicine.” You don’t have to enter the Tour de France to reap the benefits of biking. Dr. Best shares eight good reasons to get back in the saddle today.

1. **Help your heart** - Regular rides raise your heart rate, promote circulation, and elevate your good cholesterol levels. Some studies suggest cycling cuts your risk of heart disease by nearly 50 percent. Even a confirmed couch potato can get back on a bike. “Up until two years ago, we told people to see a doctor and get a cardiovascular stress test before starting an exercise program. That creates unnecessary barriers. In fact, most people are in the low risk category. Unless you have more than one risk factor, such as being overweight with a family history of heart disease, you can gradually start adding more activity to your day.” For adults, Dr. Best recommends working up to the recommended two and a half hours per week of moderate aerobic activity. “Moderate can include mowing your lawn.”

2. **Guard against cancer** - A study tracking more than 260,000 people for five years found that riding a bike to work reduced their rate of developing cancer by nearly half. Another study tracked men diagnosed with prostate cancer. It found “significantly lower” overall death rates among those
engaged in recreational activities, compared to their less active peers.

3. **Build strength** - Even in the South Florida flatlands, bicycling requires resistance and that builds muscle, especially in your legs, quadriceps, and glutes. “For the first time ever, the physical activity guidelines recognized that strength training is as important as cardiovascular activity.”

4. **Lose weight** - Whether you’re one of 160 million Americans considered obese or just need to trim a few pounds, cycling is an easy, efficient way to do so. “There’s a common misconception that running is better, but bicycling and swimming are more easily tolerated by people with arthritis and knee problems.” Compared to runners, cyclists are less likely to experience overuse injuries and inflammation.

5. **Improve flexibility, mobility, and balance** - Biking develops coordination, improves balance, and generally keeps your joints lubricated by moving them in an easy, repetitive motion. Unlike running or power walking, this low-impact activity is gentler on your joints. Think of it as long-term health insurance against stiffness and falls.

6. **Sleep better** - Researchers found a connection between decreasing levels of fitness and the ability to sleep. According to some health experts, even 20-30 minutes on your bike every other day can improve your nightly snooze.

7. **Enhance mental health** - Exercise releases mood-enhancing endorphins and inhibits production of the stress hormone cortisol. Cycling with family or friends creates socialization opportunities, which also reduces stress and depression. Biking benefits your brain in other important ways, too. “There’s clearly a link between exercise and brain health, whether we’re talking about dementia, Alzheimer’s or depression,” Dr. Best says. A 2012 study demonstrated that physically active older adults were 21 percent less likely than their counterparts to be diagnosed with dementia.

8. **Boost longevity** - Not only is there a strong relationship between fitness
and a longer life span, studies show that cycling substantially reduced deaths from diabetes, cardiovascular disease, and cancer. Many studies tout the health benefits of commuting to work by bike. In fact, the National Institutes of Health reported that, “the estimated health benefits of cycling were substantially larger than the risks relative to car driving for individuals shifting their mode of transport.” Just remember to stay alert, wear your helmet, and choose a low-traffic route.

According to Dr. Best, the key takeaway from the research is to get moving and stay moving. “Do you something you enjoy. You don’t have to join a gym to do strength training or spend $2,000 on a bike to start cycling. There are things you can do close to home that will improve your overall health and quality of life.”

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