

HEALTH BENEFITS OF CYCLING

BY JOE FRIEL

It can be difficult to keep up an exercise program, especially if you don't see results right away in the mirror or on the scales. After all, the No. 1 reason most people workout is to look and feel leaner. If you are consistent in your riding program, that will happen – but, unfortunately, we don't all get the results right away. Some never see the benefits on the scales.

There are lots of reasons why some are unsuccessful in this endeavor, including low motivation and poor food choices. Another explanation for being a chubbier than we'd like despite regular riding is genetics – some of us just weren't meant to be skinny waifs.

If you're hoping that riding will help to fight off the bulge but don't see progress on the outside, keep in mind that plenty is still happening on the inside. Many healthy benefits accrue from regular exercise. Here are some of them.

10 Other Reasons to Ride

1. **Heart Health.** Exercise improves the functioning of the heart and blood vessels while decreasing your risk of heart disease – the No. 1 killer in this country. If someone in your family died of a heart attack at a premature age then exercise and diet are all the more important for you. Don't stop!
2. **Improved Blood Chemistry.** Exercise has been shown to increase HDL (“good” cholesterol) and reduce the amount of triglycerides in the blood. Again, this means improved cardiovascular health.
3. **Lower Blood Pressure.** Blood pressure readings of 140 over 90 or greater are considered hypertensive. By age 65 almost 60% of all Americans are at this level. Research clearly shows that regular exercise alone, without any other lifestyle changes, lowers blood pressure.
4. **Decreased Risk of Cancer.** By exercising regularly you reduce the chances that you will contract some cancers, such as colon cancer.
5. **Stronger Bones.** Exercise has been shown to help prevent osteoporosis and the risk of broken bones that comes with aging. Increased bone mineral density is even evident in those under the age of 30.
6. **Reduced Chance of Diabetes.** Type II diabetes is at epidemic levels in America – no other life-threatening disease is growing as fast. Part of the reason for this is that Americans don't get enough exercise. Riding a bike regularly will improve your insulin metabolism.
7. **Greater Muscular Strength.** Remember how strong you felt when you were younger? You can regain it; research on 90-year-old people shows that great gains are possible with consistent exercise. Every day activities like climbing stairs or carrying groceries will get easier as you ride more.
8. **Reduced Stress.** Regular exercise helps you to put the stresses of life into perspective and makes for a calmer demeanor. That means your mood is more relaxed, you feel better about yourself, and you sleep better at night.
9. **Decreased Pain.** Exercise may help you reduce the discomfort caused by chronic problems such as arthritis or a bad back.
10. **Other Benefits.** Exercise improves digestion and lung function while increasing joint flexibility.

So when you step on the scales, keep in mind that it isn't telling you the whole story about your exercise program. There are lots of good things happening inside which aren't always evident there or in the mirror. Keep pedaling!

Keeping the Fat Fires Burning

But let's get back to where we started – losing body fat. Exercise is pretty good at that, if you do enough of it.

During exercise we use energy to produce movement and the more movement, the greater the calorie expenditure. For example, running at a nine-minute-per-mile pace burns about 11 calories a minute, but walking at 18 minutes per mile burns only about five. So faster exercise burns more calories in a given time.

But here's the clincher: Exercise also burns fat after a workout because once the sweating stops our metabolisms stay high for awhile. This may be the greatest benefit of exercise when it comes to losing fat. So how can you increase the post-exercise burn?

A few scientific studies provide answers. Here are some findings.

In one study, exercising for 20 minutes at 35 to 55% of aerobic capacity, as in riding briskly, elevated metabolism for 20 minutes after stopping. Not much, but better than nothing.

When subjects in another study exercised for just a few minutes at 90% of aerobic capacity until exhausted, as when riding very hard, metabolisms remained high for only 15 minutes.

Twenty minutes of walking at a brisk effort bordering on running, kept the calories burning at a high rate for 40 minutes post-exercise. When the fast-paced walking was doubled to 40 minutes, it took 100 minutes for metabolisms to return to normal!

Walking four miles per hour on a treadmill for 150 minutes burned calories post-exercise for several hours. Six hours after stopping, metabolisms were 15% higher than normal.

After exercising for three hours at a brisk walking pace, metabolic rates were high the remainder of the day and still 4.7% higher the next morning!

In a study at Colorado State University the metabolic rates of weight lifters remained above normal 15 hours post-exercise. Remarkable!

It appears that the best ways to keep the metabolic fires burning furnace-like are to exercise at a moderate intensity for a long time, or to exercise at a high intensity for a short time. Strength training also is helpful as it increases muscle mass — more muscle means more fat is burned.

To lose unwanted fat you have to start some place. Gradually building more fitness will do it. Once your fitness is greater, the weight problem will begin to take care of itself. Stick with it!

Easy to Say

A full-time job and other responsibilities can easily get in the way of regular exercise. But, although your family and job are important, so is your health and well-being.

If you find that time and motivation are the biggest reasons you can't exercise as you would like to, you may need some strategies to get started. Here are seven that may help.

1. **Exercise First.** It's best to work out first thing in the morning before a day's worth of interruptions get in the way. But if you're not a morning person, try the next strategy.
2. **Schedule Exercise.** Using your daily planner or desk calendar, write in "Exercise" every time you want to go for a ride during the week. The best time to do this scheduling is on Sunday when you know what the week's routine will look like and before your calendar

fills up. This appointment is as important as any other on your calendar. Don't skip it, and don't give in to others' needs. Be stubborn. Just say, "I have another appointment at that time."

3. **Be Prepared.** If you're going to ride after work, lay out clothes and shoes and pump up your tires before leaving in the morning. After work this will serve as a strong motivator – and you won't have to decide what to wear. If the ride will be first thing in the morning get everything ready before going to bed.
4. **At Least 5.** Even if you don't feel like, start every ride. But tell yourself you'll quit after five minutes and go back home if motivation is still low. If, after five minutes, you're still not feeling up to it go on home. If you find yourself getting nothing but five-minute workouts try the next strategy.
5. **Buddy Up.** Find a compatible riding partner and agree to meet regularly at a certain time and place. Knowing that someone else is waiting for you will get you going and make riding more fun, too.
6. **Save Gas.** Ride your bike to work whenever you can. You'll need a small backpack to carry clothes or some planning to get them to work the day before. This is an easy way to get in miles.
7. **Kill 2 Birds.** Do two things simultaneously. While riding a stationary bike watch television or read, chat with friends and family, return phone calls, or dictate letters. With a little ingenuity, you probably can find other things you can do from the seat of a bike.

These exercise strategies will help you start and maintain a daily riding routine. Keep them up and before long you'll forget you even needed such strategies in the first place.