

Bicycle Safety and the Benefits of Cycling

By
Jay Uhler

Riding a bicycle is a wonderful exercise when it is done safely. It is low impact and takes far less of a toll on your body than running. You can see more scenery covering more distance than walking. I'll mention more benefits later.

Riding safely is the key. I get terrified when I am riding my bicycle or driving my car and see someone on a bicycle with no helmet.

Some times parents are riding with no helmet, yet their children have one. Do they think of the consequences of a fall for their children yet don't think of the effect it has on their children if they get into an accident that causes a concussion or worse.

I am not the only one who is concerned. A doctor on Nantucket saw so many head injuries from bicycle accidents that he got a law passed on the island that requires cyclists to wear helmets when they are riding.

This is not to frighten you about riding a bicycle. There are far more advantages than risks. People who risk the side effects of medication are afraid of the risk of riding a bicycle. It is obvious which is better for our health.

My Father rode a stationary bike when he was almost ninety years old—eighty-nine, to be exact. He would joke and say, "I'm going to ride to Olive Hill." as he got on the exercycle. (It is twenty-four miles one way from his home) He pedaled his bike as he looked out the window watching the traffic go by.

My Mother rode the stationary bike when she was ninety-five.

The benefits of riding a bicycle are not referring to competitive bicycle racing or hotshot riding. It is referring to a comfortable bike that you ride for exercise or to run errands or to enjoy nature.

One day I was running errands. As I pulled up to the drive-up teller at the bank on my bicycle, there was a man on a bicycle in front of me. That was several years ago before gas prices escalated. It was exciting to see him there.

Bike riding can increase the gas in the engine in your body, and decrease the gas you need to run your car. Some people ride to save gas. Some ride a bicycle to work for the exercise, the joy of riding and for the sake of the environment.

Riding a bicycle can be a way to enjoy the beauty of nature. Riding when the buds are emerging on the trees in spring or when the leaves are turning in the fall are healthy and soothing to the body. Riding along the ocean in the summer between Rockport and Gloucester is one of my favorite activities.

You can also contribute to others by riding a bicycle. Last year the Rodman Ride for Kids had over 1,500 and raised eight million dollars for agencies that serve youth in

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the Boston area—youth that are at risk of getting into difficulty with society or the law. All of the 8 Million goes to help children and youth. All of the expenses for the Ride are underwritten by sponsors.

One of the recipients of money raised is TEEP, a program sponsored by Trinity Episcopal Church in Boston. Every teen who has completed the program has gone to college—the first in their family to do so. Another benefactor is a program run by the Boston Police Department. It is exciting to see police officers riding a bicycle to raise money for youth.

Don Rodman had a vision to assist young people who need help. He created a healthy and exciting way for people to give to those in need. The day of the Rodman Ride for Kids is my favorite day of the year.

Europeans are far more into cycling than we are in this country. It was amazing to see riders in France go up steep mountain roads that curved so that cars could get to the top. I'm not sure how much fun that is, yet it is an example of what the human body can do. People in European countries don't all ride to mountain tops, but they do put emphasis on bike riding and exercise.

I hope I have made the point that cycling can add to your quality of life, the length of your life and can contribute to the lives of others.

Let's focus on how to make riding a bicycle safe and comfortable as you ride. First, let us consider equipment.

Obviously, a helmet is a necessity. They are now made so that they are light weight and comfortable. You may not get the same sense of freedom, but you can be free to be safe. It may not seem Macho to wear a helmet, but you can enjoy your sanity as you tell about the safe ride. Actually, it can be Macho to emulate competitive riders, who are powerful and in great physical condition, who would not get on a bike without a helmet.

Let me dispel a misunderstanding about the benefits of gloves. The purpose of gloves is not to make your hands comfortable on the handle bars or to grip better. The purpose of gloves is to protect your hands if you fall.

A few years ago, the Rodman Ride for Kids had a short space of gravel between the start point and the road. A rider in front of me stopped quickly. To avoid hitting the person and their bike, I went down. If I was not wearing gloves, I would have been out of the ride at the beginning because someone would have been picking gravel out of my hand. Because I was wearing cycling gloves, I was unhurt and finished the twenty-five mile ride. Gloves are an important part of bicycle safety.

You may have noticed a rider with a mirror on their helmet. Sometimes a mirror is attached to handlebars. I have two mirrors attached to my glasses. I look like an ant from Mars, yet I can see everything around me. There is a reason why cars have a mirror on both sides. The difference is that often with a car, there can be blind spots. Not so with two mirrors when you are riding a bicycle. You can see everything behind you.

Glasses are beneficial to protect your eyes from bugs or things floating in the air or from the sun. You wouldn't consider a car with no windshield. Different speeds? My biggest fear is that I will get fined for going fifty miles an hour in a thirty mile speed zone. Yes, that's a ridiculous thought, but my point is that the speed is irrelevant.

It is important to have strong tires with good treads. They are your contact with the road. You get your car tuned up and it is just as important to have a professional inspect and adjust your bicycle.

Padded pants can make extended rides more comfortable. I prefer mountain bike shorts which are roomier than skin-tight cycling shorts.

Clips can make riding easier, but I fell one of the first times I tried them. I skinned my elbow and did a slight fracture to a bone in my arm when I turned to look backward while standing still. Clumsy! Yes, and when I talked with a young bicycle repairman, he advised me against the clips, because he said even after he had a lot of experience with them, he had a bad fall caused by them. I don't use them.

I like wide tires which are flat in the center to reduce resistance, but have deep treads in the center and gripping treads on the sides in case I get off the road into stones or sand. Fellow riders tell me that I could do a hundred mile ride if I had a lighter bike with different tires. I don't think my lower cheeks could tolerate 100 miles, but even if they could, my priority is safety.

It is not how far I ride, but the condition I am in when I finish the ride.

Let's compare riding on a road to riding on a bike path. I prefer the road. I have seen accidents on bike paths. I did not see it but one of my team members was run into by a young man on a bike and had his face cut and lost several teeth. That was on a bike path. He could not do the fundraising ride.

The only accident I have had was on a bike path on Martha's Vineyard. The friend I was riding with did not see a pot hole, was riding too close to me and when she went down, she fell into me and took me down with her.

The nice part of it was that a Mexican man was driving by with his family and stopped to help us. We lost a little skin, but our bicycles were in no condition to ride. He put our bikes in the back of his small wagon, had his family squeeze together so my friend and I could fit into their vehicle and drove us to our home base.

He refused to take anything and when I offered his son money to contribute to someday going to college, his father told him not to take it.

The whole family was good natured, gracious and simply wanted to help. There are many wonderful people in this world.

The problem with bike paths is that there can be people walking with no awareness of where they are, there can be skateboarders, there can be animals and people oblivious to anything around them. Sometimes several people walk beside each other the full width of the path, blocking passage for riders.

On a bike path along the Charles River, a little girl got away from her father and ran out of some bushes onto the bike path. Fortunately, I was going up a slight hill and had slowed for a blind crosswalk ahead. Her Father caught her and I was going slow enough to avoid her.

Another danger of bike paths is the varying speed of riders with no mirrors.

Let's think about riding on the sidewalk. That is very dangerous. Car drivers are not expecting a bicycle to come off the walk and cross the street.

Drivers on streets and roads are hopefully concentrating on the road and alert to danger. Not so, on bike paths.

In Massachusetts a bicycle is supposed to follow the same rules as though they were a car. This is a problem because many bicycle riders do not know that they are to act like a car driver and many car drivers get angry when a bicycle is sharing the road. Even some police officers do not know this. A transportation engineer at M.I.T. told me a story about a police officer who pulled over a cyclist riding on the street and told him to get off the street and onto the sidewalk.

Bicycles are to stop for stop signs and red lights. Riders are to give hand signals when they turn. They are to respect the rules of the road, just as a car driver.

Car drivers often do not know that a bicycle has the right of way if they are on the road. Once I was “leading” a training ride in preparation for the Rodman Ride for Kids. It was a narrow road between Gloucester and Rockport, MA. The side of the road was jagged and uneven. In such situations you are to take the middle of the lane because the edge is unsafe and if a car is passing you, it could force you to the dangerous part of the road and cause an accident.

Even though the leader, I was riding in the rear to be aware if anyone on the ride needed anything. Knowing the rules of the road and the risks, I moved to the middle of the lane so that no car driver would jeopardize the safety of the bike riders.

A woman in the car behind did not know the road laws for cars and bicycles in Massachusetts and blew on her horn to get me to move out of her way so that she could pass. I held my positions and she blew her horn until we got to a safe place to let her pass.

My hunch is that most car drivers who do not know the laws would be just as frustrated as that woman.

Fortunately, there are people who do not know the law, yet are patient and respectful of others’ safety simply because we share the road and the planet together.

In spite of some risks a bicycle is a great adventure and feels good. Sometimes I think I am too tired from a days work to go for a ride, yet when I am on my bike I feel fantastic. At the end of the ride I am energized and feel great!

Best wishes to you on your ride through life, whatever form that takes.

For more information on Bicycle Safety, check your library VHS section for:

“Effective Cycling” – This is excellent for adults and teens.

“Bicycle Safety Camp” – This is good for youth and children

“Bicycle Tripping” – This is for those who want to take daytrips or longer.

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