

TECHNIQUE

Do Right By
Your Bike

Riding an exercise bike is one of the most popular home workout options. The basic learning curve is short; exercise biking benefits your cardiovascular system and can provide an exhausting workout for the legs; and an added bonus is that it requires little concentration, so you can watch your favorite TV show or read a magazine while you cycle away. Heck, it's so easy there's nothing you could possibly do wrong, right? Wrong. Here's a checklist of considerations for safe and effective indoor pedaling.

Seat height: Many exercisers set their seat too low, which



Don't curl up on the bike: Proper posture and good extension of the legs make for a better workout.

overworks the hamstrings, underworks the quadriceps, and can strain your knees. Determine the proper setting by placing your heels on the pedals and positioning the pedals at the 6 o'clock and 12 o'clock positions. The leg on the lower pedal should be completely extended or, at the most, very slightly bent.

Seat angle: Most people prefer the seat to be level with the floor, although a slight backward tilt of the seat may be beneficial. A seat that tilts forward can force you to lean against the handlebars, a position that puts excessive strain on the hands and arms.

Seat size: Larger seats allow you to spread the weight of your upper body over a larger area and thus feel more comfortable—

but avoid seats that are so large that you must alter your pedaling motion. If you have to angle your knees outward, you're placing more stress on the joint and not getting the most efficient workout.

Toe clips or foot straps: These aren't gimmicks, and you shouldn't take them off the pedals, as many people do. These devices allow you to pull the pedal up with one leg as you push down with the other. This allows you to burn more calories during the exercise and also trains the muscles that raise the foot toward the shin and raise the thigh toward the stomach. This technique is challenging, but try it, even for 30-second or one-minute intervals.

Recumbent vs. upright: Recumbent bikes have gained popularity over the past five years because they have larger, more supportive seats and keep the back upright during cycling. The cardiovascular benefits of the two bike styles are approximately the same, but the recumbent bike may tone your buttocks to a greater extent, given the body's posture. Try both types and use whichever one is more comfortable, especially for your back.

Pedaling rate: You'll want to pedal at a rate of at least 80 rpm, but try to maintain a pedaling speed between 90 rpm and 100 rpm. This may mean using a lower resistance than you've become accustomed to, but remember: The primary benefits of this exercise are aerobic. The goal is to get your heart pumping.

Mistakes to avoid: Cycling is a low-impact activity, but you can overload parts of your body if you're not careful. For example, hunching over while riding a standard stationary bike can stress the tissues in your back and result in lower-back pain. Leaning on your hands for a long time compresses nerves in your hand and lead to numbness, and cycling for long stretches on a seat that's not anatomically right for you can numb the groin area. (This is emphatically not the purpose of home exercise!) Consider wearing cycling shorts if you plan on a long workout.—*Gerald Greenspan*

MOTIVATION
Bringing It
Outside

Personal trainer Connie Love, M.A., believes in adapting her training program to keep her exercisers inspired. "You have to be attuned to the needs of your clients," she says. "It's not always about going in that gym and doing an hour workout."

One treat the Chicago-based trainer gives her clients is bringing them outside. "We'll have a group workout on a weekend outside in the park. I bring tubing or light dumbbells, and set up stations. We do resistance exercises, agility drills, dips, pushups—three or four times around the circuit.

"Then we'll sit in the park and have juice and bagels. It's a nice change of pace, and it builds camaraderie. In Chicago we have only about 90 nice days a year, so you try to take advantage of them."

Love also keeps a training log for each of her clients "because most people won't do it on their own." Before each workout, she asks her clients about factors that might influence their workout: how they're feeling, what they've eaten, whether they're tired. She records their answers and alters the workout when necessary. The log also charts progress, which is particularly useful for new clients, who, Love notes, often get discouraged because they're not seeing results.—*Carol Slezak*