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If the Bike Fits, Ride it

One of the most efficient machines ever invented is the bicycle. For the amount of energy you put into it, you can propel yourself a significant distance (OK, maybe it doesn't seem terribly efficient on a 10% grade hill, but...). The bicycle is also a tremendously efficient machine for rehabilitation from injury. Whether it's your heart, your hip or your knee, few workouts are as safe, and yet still result in considerable fitness gains for your effort.

The bicycle is considered a "soft" workout because it does not pound your joints the way that running or a game of tennis does. Swimming and water exercise is the ultimate soft workout, but since there is minimal gravity in the water, it's not an effective exercise to guard against osteoporosis (softening of the bone). As a result, if you had to pick one exercise that contains an element of exercise qualities including balance, endurance, speed and strength, cycling is it. (What you do miss in cycling is coordination and flexibility, thus these qualities need to be sought in other activities.)

What we haven't mentioned as one of the great benefits of cycling is the transportation aspect. While we don't need to point this out to an eleven year old, adults sometimes forget that you don't need to get in a car for a trip to the store. Plus, moving through the fresh air, even with the occasional rain drop, simply feels good and saves gasoline.

While most of us ride a bike as kids, and many have bicycles in the garage, they won't get used unless they work and are fit to your body. Putting the saddle in a position that "feels OK" in the garage does not always translate to comfort ten miles down the road. As a result, we recommend everyone get a proper bike fit every few years. Call your local bike shop and schedule an appointment. Most shops will take some basic measurements (e.g. inseam, height, etc.) to get you close to your ideal position. As you make changes to your bike or get more efficient riding, you will want your fit to be re-evaluated. Getting a bike fit not only makes it more comfortable but also guards against overuse injuries from riding.

While you're at the shop you should also have your bike tuned up and checked for safety. A smooth, well-oiled machine with new tires makes the ride that much nicer. Before leaving the shop, make sure to also get a copy of your bike fit measurements.

Have these and a tape measure in your exercise bag so when you travel you can make that borrowed bike close to your own bike's specs. Also, any exercise or spinning bike can be adjusted to these positions to improve comfort and efficiency.

There are a couple of painless things we can do to truly improve our health. My top three might be to stop smoking, walk more and ride a bike. Having a comfortable, functioning bike is the only way this third thing will happen with any regularity.