

GET ACTIVE. STAY ACTIVE

Whenever I ride my bike for a long period of time, I get a pain in my neck. What could be causing this?

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It's not uncommon for cyclists to experience neck pain following prolonged periods of cycling. During cycling the neck is held in an extended position (looking upward) and the low back in a flexed position (bent forward). This position of the neck can cause neck muscles to become shortened and tight producing spasms of the muscles in this region.

Adjusting certain features of the bike can diminish the risk of injury or alleviate persistent neck pain. Simply modifying the handlebar height may be sufficient to relieve symptoms referred from the neck. Raising the handlebars or using handlebars with a shallower type drop can reduce neck hyperextension. The handlebars should, ideally, be level with the seat or at a position between level and 4 centimeters lower than the seat. If the handlebars are too low, the rider is at risk of both neck and low back pain. To ensure good body mechanics, the handlebar width should be shoulder width apart. Handlebars that are too wide can lead to strains of muscles groups like the rhomboids and trapezius muscles.

Using a shorter stem decreases the top tube length and this also decreases the likelihood of maintaining the neck in a hyperextended position. Adjusting the saddle by moving it forward is another way to reduce top tube length. This method improves posture of the neck and prevents recurrent neck pain. Remember, however, that changing the saddle position does influence motion at the knee. And cyclists should seriously reconsider this option if they have had a history of knee pain or if they experience knee pain when they change the saddle position.

Helmet fit certainly influences rider performance as well. The helmet should be snug and level on the head so that the front rim is barely visible to the cyclist's eye. If the helmet doesn't fit properly, the cyclists may compensate using more neck extension to maintain visibility.

It has also been suggested that riding with the elbows unlocked may prevent a rigid ride and shock transmitted to the shoulders and neck. Handlebar materials may affect a soft or stiff ride, but the literature indicates there is no evidence these materials eliminate or prevent neck pain.

It is a good idea to consult with a cycling club in your area to get expert advice before buying a bike to fit your needs. And it may also be of benefit to get the expert advice from a trained health care professional like a physician or physical therapist regarding an evaluation or treatment for pain related to cycling. A licensed physical therapist can provide important feedback about postural changes. They can also offer therapeutic treatment options like soft tissue mobilization/massage, manual or mechanical cervical traction, and strengthening exercises.

Performing a few routine stretches of the neck muscles before and after cycling could put the cyclist and his teammates at an advantage. Stretching may not only reduce the risk of strains, but may provide greater flexibility needed to perform tasks such as looking over your left shoulder for oncoming traffic. Endurance exercises to train the muscles and joints to tolerate static postures would be of benefit as well.

Cycling is an excellent aerobic activity, however, there are often risks that accompany the health benefits. Don't let neck or back pain limit activities that you enjoy. Get professional advice to stay healthy through the years.

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