

# Cycling - Benefits and Disadvantages

Contributed by fonant

Cycling has many benefits and if you look at the perceived disadvantages in detail, they are far outweighed by the opportunity to get fit, save money, fuel and time, and even give everyday transport a more personal feel!

## Benefits of cycling

Using a bicycle as a mode of transport has several benefits over other modes. Cycling:

- Has no fixed timetable - go when you like!
- Has no parking problems.
- Is the quickest method of transport in towns.
- Can make buses and trains more accessible.
- Keeps you fit and healthy.
- Is less impersonal.
- Has low running costs.
- Is fun!

There are benefits for society too, if this is of interest to you. More cycling means:

- Reduced motor traffic volumes
  - Fewer traffic jams
  - Reduced traffic noise
  - Reduced traffic pollution
  - Reduced wear and tear on roads
  - Less use of car parking space
  - Improved community spirit
  - Reduced demand for non-sustainable fuels
  - Lower CO2 emissions
- Disadvantages of cycling

There are various disadvantages to cycling, some real and some perceived:

- Danger on the roads
- Close-passing traffic
- Aggressive drivers
- The weather
- Wind
- Rain
- Heat and cold
- Hills
- Expense of bikes and equipment
- Poor or lacking "facilities"
- Lack of fitness
- Helmets

Time to look at these advantages and disadvantages in detail Go when you like

A bicycle in good repair is available for journeys whenever you need to travel. For short journeys, up to a few miles, a bicycle can even be the fastest way of getting there, especially in towns.

The best any-time bike is the traditional (and no longer available in the UK) roadster, like the Dutch use everywhere. They have integral locks, lights, chain guards, and a parking stand, so you really can just jump on and go. Park anywhere

When shopping, park right outside the shops. There is no need to spend time looking for a parking space, and then walking to and from the shops. If you're visiting several shops, simply move the bike and park outside each one in turn - let the bike carry heavy items and minimise the time spent walking. Catch that train

A bike can make travelling from A to B by bus or train much simpler. No need to walk miles to or from the station, no need to spend money on taxis. Sadly neither buses or trains are as cycle-friendly as they used to be, but a decent folding bike like the Brompton or the Birdy can be taken anywhere.

A large amount of useful bike-plus-train information, and a buyers guide to folding bikes, is available from the excellent AtoB magazine. Keep healthy

The biggest killer in the UK by far is heart disease caused by lack of physical exercise. Cycling and swimming are the

most recommended forms of exercise as they are gentle on the body. Cycling has the advantage that you can exercise and travel somewhere useful at the same time!

Three quarters of all personal journeys are less than 5 miles long - that's half an hour on a bike for an average person, less if you're fit. Less impersonal

Car drivers are extremely isolated in their enclosed metal boxes. Cyclists on the other hand can be recognised, and you can easily say hello to other cyclists. You can also very easily stop and chat, without needing to find somewhere to park. Low running costs

Cycling is by no means free, but the fuel is the food you eat. Regular running costs will consist of replacing tyres, inner tubes, brake blocks, and the chain. These will last several thousand miles, so a regular commuter will only replace these things perhaps once a year. Is fun

Cycling makes you feel good! Apparently exercise releases endorphins into your blood stream, but as well as that the feeling of real freedom you get when cycling is fantastic. Danger on the roads

Statistically cycling is generally considered to be more dangerous than travelling by car, much safer than riding a motorbike, and roughly as safe as walking. The actual values depend on whether you count accidents per mile, per journey, or per hour, so the figures are quite variable.

In practice cycling feels a lot more dangerous than it really is. Choice of bike can make a difference - a stable town bike feels a lot more comfortable in traffic than a frisky mountain bike.

Don't forget that bicycles are much more flexible than cars, and you can often find quiet routes that avoid the busiest roads. Large towns and cities often publish cycle route maps, which might help. Sadly many "cycle routes" are built by non-cyclists and so can be relatively useless, and sometimes they're even more dangerous than the roads they run along.

The danger to cyclists on the roads decreases very much if there are more people cycling. Cars become more used to passing cyclists, and they are less surprised to see them. Also, the more car drivers there are that also cycle, the more the motoring public will understand cyclists needs and fears. This phenomenon is known as "Critical Mass" - also the name of demonstration bike rides that take place in towns all over the world. Close-passing traffic

In the UK, car drivers are very bad at passing cyclists. For some reason they think we are happy to have just a few inches of space. They forget that we're balancing, and that we often need to swerve to avoid potholes. It's also an unfortunate happening that car wing mirrors are at roughly the same height as a cyclist's elbow...

Luckily being hit from behind is a rare occurrence for a cyclist, so while there is a strong perception that there is danger in reality this is not the case. With experience the fear of being hit by passing cars is dulled a little, but it never goes away.

Cycling assertively helps a great deal here. The worst possible thing to do is ride close to the kerb. Not only will cars pass you faster and closer, but if your front wheel hits the kerb you fall off. As a rough guide, aim to ride where the cars' left-hand wheels have made the road smooth and clean. You'll be more visible to drivers and you'll get a lot fewer punctures. Aggressive drivers

Car drivers tend not to like cyclists. This may be just because driving a car is a stressful and competitive activity, and anything that gets even slightly in the way is a nuisance. In practice a cyclist almost never will lengthen the journey time of a car driver. Often a cyclist will be overtaken, only to overtake back at the next junction, traffic lights, or traffic queue.

I also think that car drivers don't like the thought that they might hit and injure or kill a cyclist. This sub-conscious worry is something that modern cars do all that they can to remove, by insulating the car occupants from the real world as much as possible.

On the other hand, if you count the number of aggressive drivers compared with the number of drivers who happily co-exist with cyclists, the aggressive ones are a minority. Wind

Most non-cyclists think that rain is the worst weather problem for cyclists, but as soon as you start cycling you appreciate how much effort is needed to cycle into a strong wind. It's worse than climbing a hill as the wind will often be against you for the whole journey, and sometimes it even turns so it's against you on the way back too...

To reduce the problem of wind, many regular longer-distance cyclists use traditional dropped handlebars. These allow you to crouch down comfortably to reduce your frontal area. If you're not riding far however, straight bars are fine, just allow longer for the journey if it's windy.

The ultimate in wind-resistance reduction is to ride a faired (streamlined) recumbent like the Windcheetah from Advanced Vehicle Design. The reduced wind resistance means that you can ride significantly faster for the same effort. Rain

Just as much of a pain as wind, but less common, thankfully.

In winter it's best to wrap up with lots of layers, as getting cold and wet is horrible. See the notes on Cold below too.

In summer an alternative option is just to ride in T-shirt and shorts (and Shimano cycling sandals are great!) so there's less to get wet and less to dry again. If you're going long distance it does make sense to use synthetic materials like lycra, as they can dry out very quickly as you ride along. Cold

Wear windproof clothing and you'll find that you're warm even in freezing weather. Windproof gloves are worth their weight in gold!

To counteract the problem of sweat-induced moisture it's best to dress so that you're a little chilly to start with. You'll soon warm up once riding.

Pay attention to hands and feet, as they get coldest - try extra socks, but leave room in your shoes for the blood to circulate. In very cold weather it can be effective to wear thin socks to help the blood circulation, with windproof overshoes outside your cycling shoes. Neoprene (wet-suit material) overshoes are good as they add insulation as well as wind-proofing. Heat

Take great care in hot weather to keep drinking. A little and often is best. Buy one of the larger size water bottles, ideally one with a large top opening so that you can have the luxury of ice in your water! Fitness

Cycling is one of the most efficient means of travel, and so long as you don't try to win any races it's easy on your body. You'll find too that you get fit for cycling very quickly - just a few days of regular cycling and you'll notice the difference! Sadly the converse is also true, so you'll lose your cycling fitness quickly if you stop riding regularly.

Cycling at 10mph uses approximately the same amount of energy as walking at a normal pace, simply because you're sitting down and not having to expend so much energy fighting gravity. In fact a human on a bicycle is pretty much the most efficient moving thing in nature, being even more efficient than a shark (although the bike bit is probably cheating!).  
Helmets

Last, but definitely not least, is the heated debate about cycle helmets. I have done a large amount of research into both sides of the argument, and am convinced that helmets do more harm in portraying cycling as a "dangerous" sport than the limited protection they afford. Of course the helmet industry loves selling polystyrene hats for extortionate prices, and scare-mongering is an easy way to sell the things!

There are lots of helmet resources on the internet, but the main ones are:

- Bicycle Helmet Safety Institute - USA, pro-helmet
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- Cycle Helmets - International, anti-compulsion
- Cyclists Rights Action Group - Australia, anti-compulsion

If you do decide to wear a helmet, buy one with as few ventilation holes as you can bear (the holes make it more likely that your head will twist on impact, causing much worse brain injury and/or a broken neck) and wear it properly. It should be on tight so that it doesn't move around on your head with reasonable shoving, and it should be tilted forward to protect your forehead. A loose-fitting helmet tilted backwards is no use to anyone. And try to remember that the helmet is designed for impacts up to around 12mph only, and is of limited use if you get hit by a car - it doesn't make you invincible!

This article is a bit of a work-in-progress, so things may change! Opinions and ideas welcome! - Anthony [Click here to discuss this with Fonant and other Downsizers in the forum](#)