

## **On your bikes!**

### ***Bikes for all***

Cycling is very egalitarian. Almost everyone is capable of learning to ride a bicycle (or, if not, a tricycle) and most British adults can readily afford to buy and run one. As a result there are more than 20 million bicycles in the UK, with one in three adults owning at least one. Among children aged 6 – 16, cycling is the second most popular physical activity, just after swimming and ahead of football.

While cycling is a fantastic form of recreation and transport in later life, for a child it has an even more significant role. It's the only form of transport where a child is not just a passenger. For a child old enough to make his or her own journeys, it's a huge boost to independence.

The freedom that a bike brings, and the greater speed and exhilaration involved compared to being on foot, means that learning to ride one is a milestone in a child's life. Most children can't wait to crack the magic skill of balancing a two-wheeler. Once you have learned to ride a bike, then – proverbially – you never forget.

Cast your mind back to your own childhood, where summer days seemed to stretch ahead forever. Now try to imagine those days without your bike. It's impossible. Cycling permeated our lives, whether we were scrambling over scrubland or popping wheelies in the park – where there really were jumpers for goalposts.

Children's cycling today is more circumscribed, mostly due to parental fears of traffic and strangers. Yet children still like riding bikes. They just need the opportunity, the right equipment and the necessary skills. You can give them that.

You can't force children to become enthusiastic cyclists, but if you give them the right bike and enough chances to use it you won't have to: ultimately, cycling sells itself.

### ***The healthy option***

Cycling is so good for adults and children that doctors do indeed recommend it. Since 1992, the British Medical Association has urged the Government to do more to encourage cycling so that the population as a whole gets on its collective bike. Why? Because it's preventative medicine for a variety of 21st century ills, the big ones of which are coronary heart disease and obesity.

Western society is increasingly sedentary, particularly children, who end up being ferried everywhere in the family car. We are creating, as one academic put it, a nation of battery-reared children instead of free-range children.

The prescription? Better school dinners are only a small part of the equation. It's not just about cutting down on junk food, although that helps. Children in ages past used to eat bread and dripping sandwiches. What's different today is not so much the rise in calories consumed but the fall in calories expended. Kids just aren't active enough.

Health experts recommend that children take an hour or more of moderate exercise per day, and adults half an hour. Cycling is perfect because it's an aerobic exercise that's easy to incorporate into the daily routine. You can't swim to school or play tennis all the way to the cinema. You can easily go by bike.

Cycling uses the biggest muscles in the body. It burns around 300 calories per hour at an easy pace, up to around 700 or more for strenuous mountain biking. Even at a moderate pace, you need only cycle for half an hour each day to burn 11lb of fat over the course of a year, given no other lifestyle changes. That half an hour a day is enough to halve your risk of heart disease and improve overall health – so much so that regular adult cyclists enjoy a fitness level equivalent to someone 10 years younger.

Walking is good too, but cycling takes you four times as far for the same effort. It is, in fact, the most efficient form of muscle-powered locomotion on the planet. Those racehorses rippling over the grass of the Derby's final furlong burn energy like a steam engine burns coal compared to the efficient grace of you pedalling your bicycle.

It won't always feel that easy if you're coming back to cycling after a long lay-off. Minor aches in the thighs, calves and buttocks are common as your body gets used to being on a bike. But no bike should be persistently uncomfortable. If it is, it's the wrong bike or wrongly set up – both can quite easily be remedied.

Cycling is even good for your mental well-being. Like other forms of aerobic exercise you get a 'lift' afterwards, which may be due to the release of endorphins. Several studies have suggested that exercise helps adult participants deal with stress better.

### ***The green machine***

As a bicycle burns only calories, it minimises your carbon footprint. The more you use it instead of other forms of transport, the more you help fight global warming.

Cycling is better for the local environment, too. It reduces traffic on the roads and so combats congestion, it reduces noise, and alleviates the clutter on our streets associated with parked and moving vehicles.

Cycling's environmental and health benefits don't require any sacrifices either. In fact, the opposite is true. Cycling is much cheaper and, over short distances, faster. It's the tortoise to the car's hare. A car capable of 60mph will spend much of its time at 0mph in a traffic jam or going nowhere in search of a parking space. A bicycle will take you door to door at 10-15mph in almost any traffic conditions – or by avoiding the traffic entirely through a combination of backstreets and cycleways. With few delays and no late arrivals, journey times are predictable by bike. And if you are running late, you can literally step on it.

You might not want to ride if you've far to go – perhaps your job is in the next town, or you need to make a triangular journey via the nursery. Most journeys aren't far. The bulk of UK journeys are under two miles, which is just enough to put a healthy glow in your cheeks if you're cycling. According to the Department for Transport's latest National Travel Survey, the average distance for all journeys is only 6.9 miles, which is just half an hour or so by bike.

Savings will soon start to stack up, leaving more of the budget that can be spent elsewhere. The only fuel costs are the cereals you would have eaten anyway, instead of a pound a litre at the petrol pump. Cycle often enough and you could save £1,000 a year in petrol alone, before factoring in parking and other motoring costs.

In rural situations, cycling is seldom faster than other transport but it is more pleasant. You're out in the fresh air, in surround-sound countryside, travelling fast enough to cover a mile in minutes but slow enough not to miss anything. Because you travel so quietly, you get a more intimate view of nature. It's like going for a country walk with the added benefit that you get somewhere at the same time.

### ***Great escapes***

Getting on a bicycle gives you back a sense of freedom that's sometimes lost in busy 21st-century lives. Cycling home lets you work through problems en route rather than bringing them through the door. Cycling to the seaside one summer's day can give a sense of adventure and achievement that will never be lost.

Many of the experiences children have today are essentially passive. On a bike they're back in control, making things happen, finding out what they're capable of. And it will make them healthy as well as happy.

You don't need much to get a huge amount out of cycling: just the right bikes, the right equipment, and a few pointers.