

Cycling

A guide for people with heart conditions



ACPICR

Association of Chartered Physiotherapists
In Cardiovascular Rehabilitation

Cycling is very popular and can be a great way to stay active. People can use cycling in many ways, for example as a sport, to commute, for leisure, or as part of an exercise programme.

What are the specific benefits of cycling?

- May feel a more comfortable exercise as it is low impact on the joints.
- May find it easier to pace yourself on a bike.
- Cycling can be suitable for all levels of fitness from beginner to intermediate onto advanced.

Cycling can help improve or maintain...

- Aerobic fitness
- Strength, especially in the lower body
- Psychological well being
- Joint flexibility in particular improves the range of movement in the knees, hips and ankles.



When can I start?

It is recommended you attend a cardiovascular rehabilitation programme and inform the team of your wish to cycle. Cycling may even form part of your programme. When you start will depend on your current level of physical fitness as well as your cardiovascular condition and general health.

People who have had a heart attack and/or a stent fitted may be able to start quite soon, once assessed by a cardiovascular exercise professional.

People who have had heart surgery may be able to use a static bike immediately after surgery but to minimise problems with breastbone healing you may be advised to wait before using a bike on the road. How long you wait will depend on your individual cardiovascular surgery centre, but it may be up to 12 weeks post-surgery.

People who have a permanent pacemaker or implantable cardioverter device (ICD) should wait for 6 weeks after the device has been fitted. You may be able to use a static exercise bike sooner; your cardiovascular exercise professional will advise you when you are ready.



How can I get in shape?

Cycling can be adapted for most levels of fitness. It may be useful to attend cardiovascular rehab sessions and use a static bike, if available, before going out on the road. You may be able to use a turbo trainer to adapt your outdoor bike into an indoor, static bike. This could help you learn how to structure your cycling safely, and help you set a starting point.

There are also seated pedals available for people who need to work out in the chair.

Stop exercising if you experience any chest pain, palpitations, dizziness or light-headedness. If the symptoms do not go away promptly with rest and/or GTN spray/tablets seek medical advice as soon as possible.

How should I feel during my session?

Listen to your body and think about how it compares with how you feel in your cardiovascular rehabilitation exercise sessions.

Working comfortably at moderate intensity is recommended. High intensity exertion or sprint training should be avoided as this may cause problems for some people. You should feel your breathing rate and heart rate have increased but you should still be able to talk in a sentence and able to continue. It is fine to feel that you are exerting yourself so long as you are not struggling. A good cyclist uses their gears to keep the intensity at a moderate rate and the legs moving at the same speed for most of the time. If you feel exhausted following your cycling you may have worked too hard or for too long.



What about warm up and cool down?

The first 15 minutes and last 10 minutes of the session should be performed at a lower intensity. Use your gears or resistance setting and try to avoid steep hills.

Warm up - Minimum of 15 minutes. Should feel 'light' intensity.

Aerobic workout - Aim to build up to at least 20 minutes. Feeling 'somewhat hard'.

Cool down - Minimum of 10 minutes. Slow down how quickly your legs are going until you feel you have recovered.

If your fitness only allows you to do a shorter session, then still try to start slower (for 5 minutes) and finish slower (for 5 minutes).



Other things to consider

- Wear a helmet when cycling outside
- If you can, try to avoid cycling in highly polluted areas such as busy roads
- Adjust the seat height so that your legs are only slightly bent when cycling
- Cycling doesn't do much to strengthen the upper body so you should find exercises to work this area
- Plan your route in advance: consider if you can warm up and cool down appropriately, if you can avoid steep hill climbs, and how far you will cycle and are you able to cycle back again!
- Make sure you have taken your medications, as prescribed, prior to exercise
- Don't exercise immediately after eating a large meal
- Remember to take a bottle of water with you
- Do not exercise if you feel unwell



Stop exercising if you experience any chest discomfort, palpitations, dizziness or light-headedness. If the symptoms do not go away promptly with rest and/or your GTN spray/tablets, seek medical advice as soon as possible.

This guidance is based on available evidence and expert opinion.

Produced by the Association of Chartered Physiotherapists in Cardiovascular Rehabilitation www.acpicr.com.

This leaflet is not intended to replace the advice that your doctor or cardiovascular rehabilitation team give you based on their expert knowledge of your condition.

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