

Fit Facts™

FROM THE AMERICAN COUNCIL ON EXERCISE®

Spin It

SOME CALL IT TORTUROUS, OTHERS exhilarating. But there's no denying its popularity — some see group indoor cycling as the biggest thing to hit the fitness industry since step aerobics. What sets these classes apart from the usual boredom of stationary cycling is the visual imagery provided by instructors. Participants are led on a “virtual” outdoor road race complete with hills, valleys, straight-aways and finish lines.

But before you reserve your spot (most classes are so popular that reservations are a must) and start composing your victory speech, there are a few questions to ask yourself, as well as a few precautions to take, to make your first ride a smooth and enjoyable one.

What Kind of Shape Am I In?

This question is crucial. Despite its heavy promotion as a workout for even the most uncoordinated, indoor cycling is by no means for everyone. The intensity levels of many classes are far beyond what most novices or part-time exercisers can achieve and maintain, particularly for 40 minutes or more (see sidebar, left).

It's easy to get caught up in an instructor's chant of “Faster RPMs!” and “Don't sit down!” even if your body is telling you otherwise. That's why it's so important that participants either be in very good cardiovascular condition, or have the discipline to monitor and adhere to their body's cries for moderation.

Get in Cycling Shape

Just because you may not be ready for a cycling class now doesn't mean you can't be in the very near future. Consider doing some cycling-specific training before you take your first indoor cycling class. Spend some time on a stationary bike, but make it interesting by creating your own “virtual” experience by “traveling” some of your favorite road trips in your mind as you listen to music. You can increase your endurance by interspersing periods of high-intensity cycling with more leisurely pedaling.

In just a few short weeks you'll be ready to sign up for your first indoor cycling class.

Indoor Cycling Essentials

The following helpful tips can make your first cycling experience a positive one:

- Don't make the dreaded mistake of showing up in your usual boxers or running shorts — there's no better way to make your ride unbearable. Opt instead for bike shorts, preferably padded like most outdoor cyclists wear. While this won't eliminate the chaffing and discomfort altogether, it helps — a lot.
- Your second most important item: a full water bottle. Get ready to consume plenty of fluids during this class.
- Adjust the seat to the appropriate height. If the seat is too low, you won't be able to get enough leg extension on the downstroke. If it's too high, you'll be straining to reach and might injure yourself. Here's a good rule to follow: Your upstroke knee should never exceed hip level, while your downstroke knee should be about 85 percent straight. And don't grip the handlebars too tightly, as this will increase the tension in your neck and shoulders.
- Above all, concentrate on exercising at your own pace. Don't be intimidated by the high speeds and furious intensity of your cycling mates. Listen to your body and adjust the tension and speed accordingly, and don't be afraid to sit back and take a break when necessary.
- Ask your instructor about their training. In addition to cycling knowledge, they should have experience teaching group exercise and a primary certification from an organization such as ACE. Look for an instructor who encourages perceived exertion measures and/or heart-rate monitoring, and is willing to get off their own bike to coach beginners.



ACE Puts Cycling to the Test

A recent ACE-sponsored study examined how five participants of various fitness levels rated their levels of perceived exertion (using Borg's Rating of Perceived Exertion, a scale from 6 to 20) during a typical indoor cycling class. Most reported an exertion level in the high teens throughout much of the class. (Heart-rate measurements indicated that participants were exercising close to their maximum heart rate, which validates their perceptions.)

Compliments of:
Put your name and logo in this area,
then make handout copies.

ACE
AMERICAN COUNCIL ON EXERCISE

Reprinted with permission from the American Council on Exercise.

If you are interested in information on other health and fitness topics, contact: American Council on Exercise, 4851 Paramount Drive, San Diego, CA 92123, 800-825-3636; or, go online at <http://www.acefitness.org> and access the complete list of ACE Fit Facts.