

Women on Wheels: A Delicate Matter: Cycling and Genital Problems

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It's well-known that time spent in the saddle can affect your sexual health. Male cyclists suffer everything from occasional numbness to erectile dysfunction and impotence. But what about women? Not much has been written about women's soft-tissue issues.

After some research, I located a European study on the issue published in the British Medical Journal (2003) that included women cyclists.

Professor Luc Baeyons, a gynecologist with the Centre Hospitalier Universitaire Brugmen in Brussels, who specializes in sports medicine, found that numbness, skin infections, chronic swelling and lymphatic damage are common among female cyclists. Over 60% of his sample group reported genital discomfort.

Basic Anatomy

Your body makes contact with the saddle at three points: Points one and two, your sit bones, are also known as the ischial tuberosities. The third point is the soft-tissue between your legs. Whereas sit bones are designed to withstand body weight and pressure, the soft-tissue of your genitalia is not. During long rides, the pressure exerted on soft-tissue can cause painful skin irritation and constrict blood flow. This can deaden the nerves.

Posture Affects Pressure

In a study of both male and female cyclists, **Dr. Frank Sommer**, a noted urologist at the University of Cologne in Germany, found that posture affects pressure and genital blood supply. The more stretched out you are on your bike, the more pressure you put on your soft-tissue, and the greater the possibility of sexual health problems. The study found that a cyclist riding a bike with her body at 30 degrees to the horizontal can experience as much as 70% reduction in the blood supply to the genitals.

Common Problems

Vaginitis (crotchitis), bacterial infections and yeast infections are the most common vaginal problems that women cyclists encounter. Any one of these conditions can sideline you during the cycling season. But don't despair, there are simple steps you can take to help prevent saddle sores and vaginal problems.

What To Do?

Get the Right Saddle – Test different saddles for comfort. Adjust saddle height and the fore/aft position.

Get a Bike Fit – Take your bike to your local shop and have the fit expert check that your bike is adjusted properly to fit your body size. A professional bike fit is well worth the money.

Padded Shorts – Get shorts with thick, seamless padding. And remember that cycling shorts are meant to be worn without underwear – even women’s shorts.

Use an Emollient – With clean hands, apply a good emollient to your genital area and thighs to help prevent chafing. Find a chamois cream or jelly that works best for you.

Practice Good Hygiene – Get out of your padded shorts as soon as you’ve finished your ride. Thoroughly wash and dry your crotch. Wash your padded shorts. NEVER cycle in shorts you haven’t washed.

Go Vertical – Consider adjusting your bike stem and handles so your posture can be more vertical. Sixty degrees to the horizontal is recommended.

Change Positions – Move around on your saddle while you ride. Every 10 minutes, stand up in the pedals to give your “privates” a break from the pressure.