

CHARLOTTE COUNTY HEALTH DEPARTMENT

Tips for successful bicycle commuting



Tried and tested tips for cyclists, by cyclists.



Leading the Way to a Healthier and Safer Community

Tips for successful bicycle commuting

Introduction

Welcome to the Charlotte County Health Department! We would like to encourage you to participate in our Bicycle Commuter Program. Here are a few great reasons why you should start commuting to work by bicycle, followed by tips and advice on getting started. In order to support bicycle commuters, The Charlotte County Health Department has invested in your health by providing you with showers, bicycle lockers and a bicycle repair station at the Port Charlotte facility.

Here are some of the benefits you will receive from bicycling to work:

- **Lower travel costs:** Bicycle commuting greatly reduces gas bills. The typical annual operating cost of a bicycle is 2.25% that of the yearly cost of an automobile.
- **Better health:** Regular cyclists enjoy a fitness level equivalent to being 10 years younger. Cycling 5 miles a day reduces the risk of coronary heart disease by 50% and anxiety, stress and depression are found to be reduced by regular exercise.
- **Weight loss:** Studies have shown that the average bicycle commuter loses 13 pounds in the first year with no substantial change to their diet.
- **Environmental responsibility:** By cycling to work, you are helping to lower the pollution level in Charlotte County, directly making Charlotte County a safer and quieter place to live and raise your family.
- **Stress reduction:** Commuting to work by bicycle gives you the ideal opportunity to relax and clear your mind both before and after a full day at work.

Our Bicycle Coordinator and other bicycle commuter employees will be happy to answer your questions and help you get started as a bicycle commuter.

Thank you for joining our bicycle friendly business,



Eric Stockley, *Charlotte County Health Department Employee*
International bicycle tourist and Team Race Across America (RAAM) competitor

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Selecting The Right Bicycle for You

Here are some things to consider when choosing a bicycle:

- How often and how far do you plan to ride?
- What kind of riding do you plan to do? On pavement, off road, bike paths, leisurely, competitive, shopping, commuting etc.
- What's your budget? Remember bicycle stores often have quality used bikes and Craig's List has some good bikes once you know what kind of bike you want and what size you need. Good quality used bicycles can also be found in yard sales, newspaper classified advertising and Craig's List.

Talk to other cyclists, ask for advice from staff at a reputable bike shop, or lease a bike for a couple of weeks to find out what suits you best before making your purchase. Be sure to shop around to find a good commuter bike and don't be afraid to ask the retailers what other bikes they can get if you don't see what you like in stock. They often have information on a range of bicycles that they can order for you. If you decide on buying a new bike, head for one of Charlotte County's quality bicycle stores. Bear in mind that new bikes can take a few weeks to break in. Cables stretch, spokes slacken and nuts and bolts work loose.

All the bike stores in Charlotte County offer free after sales maintenance checks following your purchase. Ask the dealer for their after sales maintenance policy as it may vary from store to store. Most of the discount stores seldom offer an after sales maintenance service. Store bought bikes are usually not as durable as bicycles from a reputable dealer and occasionally are not well assembled.

If you want to buy a second-hand bike through Craig's List, EBay, yard sales or classified newspaper advertisements be sure to take an experienced biking buddy along to check out the bike before you make a purchase. Several members of CCHD staff are regular cyclists and can help you with your selection.

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Different Types of Bicycles to Choose From

Town bikes (Sometimes called utility bikes or beach cruisers)

These are great for getting around town. They put you in a comfortable upright position so you can see and be seen more clearly.



Photo courtesy of Trek Bicycle Corporation

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Their features are designed for comfort and can include:

- A broad, well-sprung saddle
- Baskets or carriers
- A kick stand
- Mudguards
- Simple gears, if any
- “Jumbo” tires

Town bikes can be fun and are usually easier to maintain. They are often cheaper than more specialized bikes and can often be bought used at yard sales etc.

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Hybrids or Cross bikes

Hybrids have become more popular over the last few years. They combine some of the features of racing bikes (lighter weight, more gears etc) with mountain bikes (straight handlebars; heavier, sturdy wheels).



Photo courtesy of Trek Bicycle Corporation

They are designed to be easier to ride on roads than mountain bikes but they are stronger than racing bikes and can take the knocks of commuting better than racing bikes. Tires are between mountain bike and racing bike in width making them slower but giving a better grip on the road surface. Hybrid bicycles allow you to ride in an upright position as opposed to being bent over on a racing bicycle. They are rugged and make great bicycles for most commuter riding as they fare well on road surfaces and are easy to handle in traffic.

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Racing bikes

Racing bicycles are designed to be light and fast in order to give their riders a competitive edge.



Photo courtesy of Trek Bicycle Corporation

The features that make them light and fast include:

- Thin tires
- Frame tubes are made of light weight material such as carbon fiber, titanium or aluminum
- Dropped handlebars give the rider the option of riding in a more aerodynamic position
- They often have a wide range of gears

These bicycles are designed for speed and are good for riding longer distances. They are not generally good bikes for commuting because they are vulnerable to damage from poor road surfaces. However, if your commuter route has a good blacktop or concrete surface they can be excellent for commuting as they require less energy to pedal and get you to your destination faster than other bikes. Their tires are narrow and have very little tread and are designed for smooth surface riding only. These bikes tend to be more expensive than the other types of bikes.

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Mountain bikes

Mountain bikes perform well on dirt paths, rough tracks and badly paved roads due to their design and suspension.



Photo courtesy of Trek Bicycle Corporation

Mountain bike features may include:

- Wider, heavier tires, with knobby tread for added traction when riding off road
- A wider range of gears than racing bikes
- The frames are stronger and tend to be heavier unless you purchase a racing mountain bike and these can cost several thousand dollars
- Suspension: This can be on the front wheel only or may be on both wheels for added comfort
- Disk brakes, these give added breaking power especially in wet or muddy conditions
- Straight handlebars is standard for mountain bikes but extra handles may be added to the end of the handlebars to give the rider more options in hand positioning

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Mountain bikes have become very popular because they are fun to ride on all surfaces. They are a good commuting choice as they come at a wide range of prices. Store-bought basic models are relatively cheap and can often be seen in yard sales or classified newspaper advertisements. Racing mountain bikes usually have full suspension and can be expensive. People commuting on mountain bikes often fit smooth-treaded tires sometimes called “slicks”. These tires make the bike go faster and give a smoother ride.

BMX bikes

Bicycle motocross (BMX) bikes are designed for specialized racing on BMX tracks. There is an excellent BMX track and BMX club in Punta Gorda. They can also be used for performing tricks and can often be seen on TV in extreme sports programs. BMX bicycles tend to be the choice of teenagers but some adults enjoy riding them as well. BMX bicycles are far from the ideal bikes for commuting as the low seat position can be uncomfortable on longer rides, and the single speed can make overpasses difficult to negotiate.

Fitting Your Bicycle

Comfort is everything when cycling and making sure your bike fits correctly will greatly add to your comfort and enjoyment. You should be able to stand over the crossbar with both feet flat on the ground, with 1-3 inch clearance under your crotch. You can also adjust the saddle forward or back and the “nose” (front) of the saddle can be tilted up or down to meet your needs. The handlebars can be raised or lowered until you feel comfortable. Getting the right fit starts by having the correct frame size. A frame that is too large or too small for you will never fit correctly no matter how much adjusting you do to the saddle and handlebars. To determine the right frame size either consult with a local bicycle store or look online for information, as there are several formulas you can use depending on how complex you want to get.

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Choosing the Right Equipment

Tools

When commuting you'll need to carry three bicycle tire-irons, a small hand pump (one that can be attached to the frame or carried in a basket or pannier bag) and a spare inner tube for the rare occasions when you get a puncture. You can reduce your chances of getting a puncture by fitting a Teflon strip between the tires and the inner-tube. Other handy tools to carry are Allen keys (check as you may need to buy metric Allen keys) and an adjustable wrench. Ask the bicycle store to show you basic maintenance and repairs if you are buying a bicycle from them. You can also find bicycle maintenance and bicycle repair tips online.

Mudguards

Mudguards are great for getting you home during the summer season in Florida as they protect you and your bike from water splashing up from the road after a shower.

Bell

A bell or horn is useful to alert other traffic or pedestrians to your presence.

Transporting “stuff” on your bicycle

Think about what you need to carry and how you will carry it on a bike. You can choose a backpack, a basket (good for a small bag of shopping), briefcases that hook over the rear carrier (keeping your paperwork clean and tidy) or pannier systems big enough to carry the weekend supermarket purchases. Another option is to simply wear a backpack of your choice. For towing the kids or for maximum carrying capacity, try a trailer.

Hydration System

Due to extreme heat in Florida a suitable hydration system is essential to keep you hydrated. For short distances this can be as simple as a bottle of water or sports drink of your choice. Most bicycles have screws in place to accommodate adding a water bottle cage. These can be purchased at a bike or discount store. The bottle can also be carried in a backpack, handlebar mounted basket or “pannier” bag. Free bottles are available from our bicycle coordinator, subject to availability.

For longer rides you might want to consider buying a hydration system that you carry like a backpack often called a “Camelback”. The basic models have a bladder that you fill with fluid and a non drip tube that hangs over your shoulder so you

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can drink safely as you ride. More elaborate models have a built in backpack that extends to accommodate supplies as well as a bladder compartment for fluids. Some models have several smaller pockets making them ideal for commuting as you can carry your pump, spare tube, tool kit, cell phone, keys etc. with ease.

Keeping Your Bicycle Safe

It is always best to insure your bicycle. Check your household insurance policy to see if it covers your bike, and check the exclusion clauses.

Tips when locking your bike:

- If you have to leave your bike unattended always be sure to lock it. Even if you are leaving it for a short period.
- Buy as high quality lock as you can afford. A good quality U lock is much harder to break or cut than less expansive chains or cables.
- If possible lock your back wheel and your frame to a solid object or bicycle rack. If you choose to use a cable or chain thread it through the frame and the wheels then to a solid object i.e. bicycle rack. If space is limited lock the frame to a solid object as it is the most valuable part of your bike.
- Whenever possible lock your bike where it can be easily seen. Try locking your bike in a well trafficked area or where it can be watched from windows as this helps to deter thieves. This will also improve your personal security while locking and unlocking your bike. Avoid locking your bicycle in secluded areas.
- Try not to lock your bicycle to things that are easily cut such as chain wire or tree branches. Solid bike racks or metal poles or fences make good choices. CCHD's Port Charlotte clinic has bicycle lockers for staff. They are available on a first come basis daily. You will need to bring your own padlock for the locker door.
- Be respectful of others by not locking your bike to handrails or near pedestrian facilities where it could interfere with people's access. Always ensure that your bike does not block access to ramps or other facilities for people in wheelchairs or with disabilities..
- Remove accessories from your bike if you have to leave it unattended. This may include removing lights, cycle computer, water bottles, pump and panniers.
- Remember to always keep your bike safe even when you have it at home. If possible keep your bike in a locked shed or store it indoors. If it's in the garage and you leave the garage door open be sure your bike is secured to something fixed in place i.e. a heavy table or work bench.

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Tips for Riding Safely in Traffic

As the bicycle is legally a vehicle in the State of Florida, cyclists have the same rights and responsibilities as other traffic. Charlotte County Sheriff's office and Punta Gorda police will issue a ticket if you are breaking traffic rules. Wearing bright colored clothing makes it easier for other road users to see you. If possible make eye contact with drivers waiting to pull out or give them a friendly hand wave to be sure they have seen you and cycle assertively. Being assertive means taking your proper place on the road, using hand signals and making clear, positive movements. Florida law requires that you always ride in the same direction as the traffic, never against it. Charlotte County does allow bicycles to ride on side walks but remember that pedestrians have the right of way if you choose to use a path. Included in your CCHD bicycle information packet is a map of the approved bicycle paths in Charlotte County.

Avoid veering in and out between parked vehicles. Always maintain a consistent path along the road and avoid unnecessary swerving. Remember that long vehicles cut across corners when turning, so don't cycle on their inside when approaching junctions. A common mistake made by auto drivers is making a right turn and cutting in-front of cyclists. Be sure to read the Florida Bicycle Law Enforcement Guide that is included in your new hire packet with CCHD.

Look carefully at how you plan to ride to work and pick the safest route. Remember the best cycling route may not be the route you would take by car, it may be longer so allow extra travel time to get you to work on time. Look at a street map and ask advice of other cyclists – they often know the short cuts and quiet roads and will be only too pleased to help.

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Do's and Don'ts in Case of an Accident

Cycling is generally a healthy activity – but what do you do if you have an accident?

- Carry ID (name, telephones of contacts and next of kin) and paper to take notes and a cell phone.
- At the scene of an accident, get out of the way to a place of safety as quickly as you can. Make a note of the precise location of impact and mark it on the road if possible. If your cell phone has the capability take photographs of the accident scene and any damage including injuries. Obtain the names and addresses of witnesses and drivers. Write down the registration numbers of vehicles involved.
- Don't accept any responsibility for the accident regardless of the situation. Don't admit it's your fault and don't make any promise of compensation because in the eyes of the law it may not be your fault. If pressed, say you'll leave it in the hands of your insurer.
- Call for help – you may need someone to call for an ambulance, and you should report the accident to the police ASAP.
- You may be in shock, so take a few minutes to catch your breath and calm down.
- Check your bike thoroughly before you start to ride it again. Handlebars may be twisted, brake cables snapped, or wheels damaged. If the bike does not steer correctly it could be that the frame is now bent. In this case take it to a quality bike store for a full inspection.
- If injured, visit your doctor or hospital Emergency Department ASAP if there is any possibility you may be injured. Remember many injuries may not be immediately apparent but may show up later. If you are a member of a Florida or national bicycle advocacy organizations contact them for advice.

Reporting dangerous driving

If you have a complaint against a driver for poor driving obtain the vehicle registration number and ask the police to take action.

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Riding in Comfort and Being Seen by Others

Clothes

When selecting clothing for cycling keep in mind that it needs to be seasonally comfortable and easily visible to other road users. Plan clothing for the hot summer months and cooler winters and keep comfort and visibility in mind. If your work requires a high dress standard or if you get hot and sweaty commuting, you might prefer to cycle in casual clothes or cycling gear and get changed at work. CCHD's Port Charlotte clinic has staff showers for your convenience.

Shorts, skirts and trousers

Spandex cycling shorts are designed to be comfortable by yielding as you pedal so that rubbing is reduced and chafing avoided. They usually have synthetic chamois or gel padding for riding comfort.

For more comfort you may prefer baggy-style cycling shorts which have a padded lining too. You can also purchase padded underwear to make cycling more comfortable. Avoid shorts, skirts or trousers that have thick seams in the seat. If you are wearing long trousers be sure to either tuck the trouser leg cuffs into your socks or use an ankle band to secure the material and stop it from getting dirty or tangling in the chain.

Jackets

Lightweight cycling jackets are usually made in bright colors for safety. Look for one that is shower proof and made from a fabric that "breathes" to avoid moisture building up inside the jacket as you ride.

Shirts and blouses

Long sleeved shirts and blouses have the advantage of reducing your exposure to the sun. Snug fitting shirts and blouses help reduce flapping in the breeze. Select bright colors for high visibility. There are many synthetic fibers available that "wick" sweat away from your body. Check the label and brand of fabric you are buying to be sure it will keep you cool. Spandex and Lycra are often used in cycling clothing because of their ability to stretch, their aesthetics and low wind resistance.

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Colors

Bright colors (neon yellow, lime green and orange) are most visible during the day. White or light colors are most visible at night.

Reflective gear

Fluorescent vests and reflective ankle straps are available and some cycling shoes and clothing have reflective qualities. Florida law requires that you ride with a white front light and red tail light after dark. You may be issued a ticket if you fail to abide by this law.

Gloves

Cycling gloves give your hands extra gel padding to reduce road vibrations. The gloves can also help protect your hands during a fall.

Shoes

Normal shoes or sneakers work fairly well for most people, though stiffer-soled shoes are better at transferring power to the pedal and can be less fatiguing.

Pedals

Racing cyclists and many other keen cyclists use a "clip-less" pedal and shoe to improve efficiency. However, they can be expensive and are not necessary for bicycle commuting and leisure cycling. Generally a plain pedal and regular footwear is the norm for commuter cyclists.

Helmet

Florida law currently requires cyclists under the age of 16 years to wear a helmet while riding on the road. While it is not mandated for adults to wear cycling helmet, CCHD strongly advises all cyclists to wear a helmet when cycling. CCHD also participates in bicycle helmet programs and the CCHD bicycle coordinator may be able to issue and fit you with a free helmet for subject to availability. Contact CCHD bicycle coordinator the fitting of your helmet if you have bought your own helmet and fit it your self. Several CCHD staff have also been trained to fit bicycle helmets ask the CCHD coordinator for names of qualified helmet fitters.

Lights and reflectors

Florida law requires a clear light at the front and a red light at the rear of the bicycle if being used after dark. You may be given a ticket if you fail to abide by this rule.

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Setting Up Your Bicycle for Comfort and Safety

Adjust your seat to the right height

For your safety it is important to be able to put a foot down on the ground to keep your balance when you come to a stop. Your leg should be just slightly bent at the bottom of the pedal stroke. When buying a new or used bicycle from a reputable bicycle store they will help you determine the best saddle height for you. You can also adjust the distance from the saddle to the handlebars and the "tilt" of the saddle. There are several formulas on line for determining the best position for your saddle or call CCHD's bicycle coordinator if you need advice.

Check your handlebars

The handlebars should be covered by hand grips or in the case of "dropped" handlebars have stoppers in the ends for safety. Your handgrips need to be secure and should not pull off easily. You should be able to reach the handlebars easily without excessive stretching. There shouldn't be any loose movement where the handlebars and forks connect through the frame of your bike.

Check your brakes work properly

Try to push your bike forward with the front brake fully on. If the wheel turns at all, then the brake needs adjusting. The same test can be done to the back wheel.

For fast, safe stopping apply both brakes simultaneously using firm pressure on both levers. If the back wheel skids, release the back brake slightly.

Tires

Your tires should be inflated to the correct pressure which is usually indicated on the side of the tire. Check your tire pressure every time you get on your bike with your thumb just to be sure it is inflated and also check it weekly with a pressure gauge. The correct pressure is essential for safe riding, comfort and efficiency. Check tires after each ride for sand spurs, glass, nicks and cuts, tread wear and replace tires as needed. The CCHD Port Charlotte clinic has a bicycle pump and bicycle tools located in the docking area. These tools may be used by CCHD staff, but all tools must be returned after use and inner tubes replaced.

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Wheels

Lift the bike and spin the wheels one at a time. They should spin freely with no rubbing on the brakes or frame. Rubbing may indicate that the wheel is loose in the fork and has moved out of alignment. If the wheel has not moved then the wheel may be damaged and out of shape or the brakes need adjusting. Check for wheel wobble by gripping the wheel rim tightly at the top and trying to move it from side to side. If there's movement it may be as simple as the wheel nuts are not tight. If the wheel is secured tightly in the forks then the loose "play" may mean the bearings need adjusting or the spokes need adjustment. This may require you seeking professional help from a quality bike store.

Planning Your Bicycle Maintenance Schedule

Used with permission from League of American Bicyclists

All vehicles require maintenance to perform reliably. If you don't want your bike to strand you on the road, you must keep it in good condition. Remember, "Love your bike and your bike will love you."

Most people who buy and ride bicycles want to keep them in good shape, but first need to know where to begin. The following list of necessary maintenance items and recommended frequency of maintenance is designed to give a recreational or club cyclist or a commuter an outline for a schedule. Those who often ride in rain and mud, or who put on very high weekly mileage, will need to perform routine maintenance more often to keep their bikes in optimal condition. Conversely, those who ride relatively little can use a somewhat more relaxed schedule.

Before every ride:

- Check tire air pressure.
- Check brakes and cables.
- Be sure your crank set is tight.
- Be sure quick release hubs are tight, but not too tight.

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After every ride:

- Inspect tires for glass, gravel shards, and cuts on tread and sidewall.
- Check wheels for true.
- Clean the bike's mechanical parts as necessary.
- Once a week or every 200 miles:
- Lubricate chain (with dry lube; or every other week or 400 miles with wet chain lube).

Once a month:

- Completely clean the bike, including the drivetrain if necessary.
- Inspect chain and freewheel. Measure the chain for wear, check for tight links and replace the chain if necessary.
- Inspect and lubricate brake levers, derailleurs and all cables.
- Inspect pedals and lubricate SPD style cleats.
- Inspect and check for looseness in the:
 - stem binder bolt
 - handlebar binder bolt
 - seatpost binder bolt (or quick release)
 - seat fixing bolt
 - crank bolts
 - chainring bolts
 - derailleur mounting bolts
 - bottle cage bolts
 - rack mounting bolts (use thread lock on these)
 - brake and derailleur cable anchors
 - brake and shifter lever mounting bolts
 - brake mounting bolts (do not alter brake centering)
- Inspect tires for wear; rotate or replace if needed.

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Every three months:

- Wax bike. A clean, shiny bike always seems to go faster and farther.
- Inspect frame and fork for paint cracks or bulges that may indicate frame or part damage; pay particular attention to all frame joints.
- Visually inspect for bent components: seat rails, seat post, stem, handlebars, chainrings, crankarms, brake calipers and brake levers.

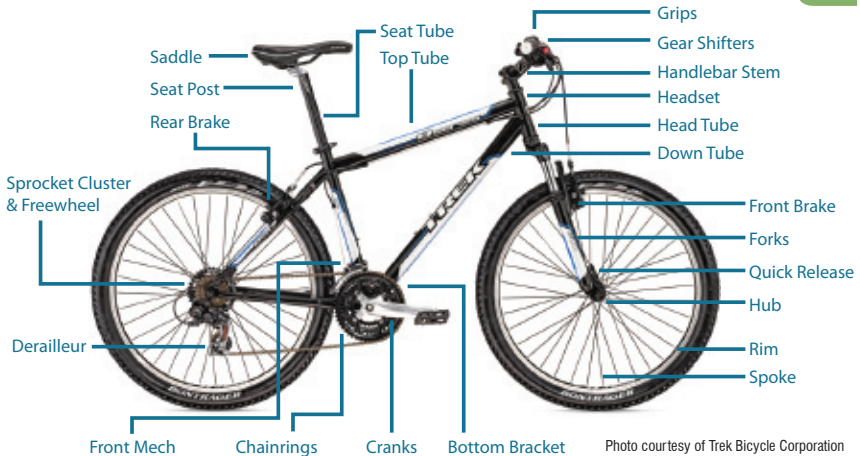
Every six months:

Inspect and readjust bearings in headset, hubs, pedals and bottom bracket (if possible; some sealed cartridge bearings cannot be adjusted, only replaced).

Annually:

- Disassemble and overhaul; replace all bearings (if possible); and remove and if necessary replace all brake and shift cables. This should be performed at 6000 miles if you ride more than that per year. Commuters who often ride in the rain or mountain bikers who get dirty should overhaul their bicycles more often.

Before any important journey it's a good idea to have a professional double check all adjustments so no problem spoils your great ride.



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Contacts

Visit www.CharlotteCHD.com for current contact information for national, state, and local organizations, bike routes, events and more.

