

The Benefits of Cycling: Why Getting on a Bike Might Be the Best Thing You Do for Your Body

Everything You Need to Know About Cycling — From Heart Health to Happy Vibes

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A person cycling on a city road, representing urban fitness and cycling benefits

Cycling is one of the most accessible forms of exercise — whether you're in midtown Manhattan or a quiet suburban trail.

You keep hearing about cycling. Your coworker does spin class three times a week. Your neighbor just got a new road bike. Your Instagram feed is full of sunrise rides and Peloton achievements. And you're starting to wonder — is there actually something to this, or is it just another fitness trend?

Here's the truth: **the hype is absolutely real.** Cycling is one of the most powerful, well-researched, and genuinely enjoyable forms of exercise out there. And the best part? You don't need to be an athlete to benefit from it. You just need a bike and a willingness to start.

In this post, I'm breaking down everything — from what cycling does for your heart, your muscles, and your joints, all the way to your mood, your social life, and your overall quality of life. Whether you've never touched a bike since childhood or you're looking to add something new to your routine, this one's for you. Let's get into it.

Why Cycling Works for Everyone

Here's what I love most about cycling: there's basically no barrier to entry. It doesn't care how old you are, what your current fitness level looks like, or what the scale says. If you can sit on a seat and turn your legs, you can cycle.

Unlike running or high-intensity classes, cycling is **naturally low-impact and self-paced**. That means you control your effort completely. Go slow and enjoy the scenery. Push harder when you're ready. There's no coach yelling at you, no pace you have to keep up with, and no moment where you feel like you're "too out of shape" to participate.

It's also incredibly easy to scale. Beginners can start with flat, easy 15-minute rides. Intermediate riders can tackle hills and longer distances. Advanced cyclists can push into high-intensity interval training on a stationary bike. One activity, every level — that's rare in the fitness world, and it's a big reason cycling has stuck around forever.

"Cycling meets you exactly where you are. That's not something most workouts can say."

Cardiovascular Benefits: Your Heart Will Thank You

Let's talk about the big one. Your heart is a muscle, and like every other muscle in your body, it gets stronger when you train it. Cycling is one of the most effective ways to do exactly that.

Regular cycling strengthens the heart muscle itself, improves blood circulation throughout your body, lowers your resting heart rate, and significantly reduces your risk of heart disease and stroke. These aren't minor perks — these are life-changing, years-adding benefits.

Research backs this up hard. A large-scale study published in *BMJ Public Health* found that people who commute by bike have a **24% lower risk of being hospitalized for cardiovascular disease** and a **47% lower risk of all-cause mortality** compared to non-active commuters. Read that again. Nearly half the risk of dying — just from riding a bike regularly.

The 150-Minute Rule

Major health organizations including the American Heart Association recommend **150 minutes of moderate-intensity aerobic activity per week**. That's just **30 minutes of cycling, 5 days a week** — or 50 minutes, 3 days a week. Completely achievable, even for the busiest person in Manhattan.

Cycling also helps lower LDL ("bad") cholesterol, regulate blood pressure, and improve your body's overall cardiovascular efficiency. Your heart gets better at doing its job. That means more energy, better endurance, and a longer, healthier life.

Muscle Building and Toning: Which Muscles Does Cycling Work?

Think cycling is just a cardio workout? Think again. Every pedal stroke is a resistance exercise, and your body is working hard the whole time.

Primary Muscles Engaged

- **Quadriceps** — The big muscles on the front of your thighs do the heavy lifting on the downstroke. These are the main drivers of your power output.
- **Glutes** — Your glutes fire through the entire pedal stroke, especially on hills and higher resistance. Cycling is genuinely great for building a stronger backside.
- **Hamstrings** — Working in opposition to the quads, your hamstrings engage on the upstroke and help create a smooth, full pedal circle.
- **Calves** — Your gastrocnemius and soleus get constant, low-level activation throughout every ride.
- **Hip Flexors** — Especially active when pulling upward through the pedal stroke. Over time, cycling builds real hip flexor endurance.
- **Core** — You're stabilizing your trunk with every single pedal stroke. A long ride is a surprisingly effective core endurance workout.

Now, let me be straight with you. Cycling is an **endurance-building exercise**, not a max-strength builder like heavy squats or deadlifts. You won't grow massive legs from cycling alone. But you *will* build lean, functional, toned muscle — the kind that looks good and actually performs in everyday life. And if you pair cycling with some strength training? That's a genuinely powerful combination.

"Lean, functional muscle. That's what cycling builds — and that's exactly what most of us actually want."

Low-Impact Advantages: Easy on the Joints, Hard on Calories

"Low-impact" does *not* mean easy. Don't let that phrase fool you. It means your joints aren't taking a beating — but your lungs, heart, and muscles absolutely are.

When you run, every stride sends a force of **2.5 to 3 times your body weight** through your ankles, knees, and hips. Over miles and months, that adds up — and it's why running has an injury rate of **2.5 to 5.8 injuries per 1,000 hours**. On a bike? Your feet never strike the ground. There's zero impact force. Your joints are supported, cushioned, and protected the entire ride.

This makes cycling the go-to workout for:

- People with knee pain, arthritis, or joint inflammation
- Anyone recovering from a lower-body injury
- Older adults who need to stay active without the pounding
- People who are overweight and find high-impact exercise painful or discouraging

In fact, physical therapists regularly prescribe cycling as part of rehabilitation programs for knee and hip injuries. If the PT world trusts it for recovery, you can trust it for fitness.

And yes — you absolutely burn real calories. A 155-pound person cycling at a moderate pace burns approximately **500-600 calories per hour**. Push the intensity up, and that number climbs significantly.

Indoor vs. Outdoor Cycling: Which Is Better for You?

This is one of the most common questions I get, and my honest answer is: they're both great. The best one is the one you'll actually do. But let me break down the real differences so you can make the right call for your life.

Indoor Cycling

- Completely weather-proof — no rain, heat, cold, or New York City traffic to worry about
- Ideal for structured interval training — you can control resistance precisely and follow programmed workouts
- Convenient — hop on before work, during lunch, or at 10 PM with zero commute
- Safe at any hour of day or night
- Spin classes and platforms like Peloton create powerful community accountability — and community keeps you consistent

Outdoor Cycling

- Terrain variability naturally changes your effort level — hills, wind, and road surfaces keep your body adapting
- Nature exposure is a proven mood booster on its own (more on that below)
- Requires balance, coordination, and spatial awareness — you're developing real-world skills
- Fresh air and changing scenery make long rides feel far shorter than they actually are
- Mentally stimulating in a way a stationary bike simply can't replicate

Tony's Verdict

Stop overthinking it. If you have access to outdoor routes you enjoy, ride outside when you can. If weather, safety, or schedule is a barrier, ride inside. If you can do both — even better. The one that keeps you showing up consistently is the winner. Full stop.

Cycling vs. Running: The Great Debate

People love to pit these two against each other. But I'm here to tell you: it's not a competition. They're teammates. Here's the honest side-by-side:

Category	Cycling	Running
Calorie Burn (per hour, moderate effort)	500–600 kcal	590–700 kcal
Joint Impact	Near zero — weight is supported by the bike	2.5–3x bodyweight per stride
Injury Rate (per 1,000 hours)	0.6–1.3 injuries	2.5–5.8 injuries
Bone Density Benefit	Neutral	Significant (+5–10% hip/spine)
Beginner Sustainability	Very High	Moderate
Mortality Risk Reduction	~30% lower	~35% lower
Recovery Time (muscle soreness)	12–24 hours	24–48 hours

Running burns marginally more calories per minute and is better for bone density because it's weight-bearing. Cycling carries a dramatically lower injury risk, allows for longer sustainable sessions, and is far gentler on your body. And

when it comes to the thing that matters most — how long you live — the Copenhagen City Heart Study found the mortality benefits are virtually identical.

Bottom line: cycling doesn't replace running. Running doesn't replace cycling. Do both when you can. They make each other better.

Mental Health Benefits: The Mood Boost You Didn't See Coming

Nobody talks about this enough, and I think that's a mistake. Cycling isn't just good for your body — it's one of the best things you can do for your mind.

Every ride triggers a release of endorphins — your brain's natural feel-good chemicals. But it goes deeper than that. Regular cycling has been clinically linked to:

- **Significant stress reduction** — cortisol levels drop after sustained aerobic exercise
- **Improved sleep quality** — your body temperature regulation and circadian rhythm both benefit
- **Reduced symptoms of anxiety and depression** — research shows cyclist commuters have a **20% lower risk of being prescribed mental health medication** compared to non-active commuters
- **Improved self-esteem and confidence** — seeing your own progress is genuinely powerful

A landmark study covering 1.2 million U.S. adults found that cycling was among the top-performing activities for mental health improvement across all demographics. Cyclists reported notably fewer days of poor mental health per month than non-exercisers.

And if you ride outdoors? You're stacking nature exposure on top of exercise — and research consistently shows that spending time in natural environments independently reduces stress, anxiety, and mental fatigue.

"There's something almost meditative about a long ride. It's just you, the road, your legs, and your thoughts — and somehow, the world's problems feel a little smaller by the time you get home."

The Social Side of Cycling

Working out alone is fine. Working out with other people? That's where consistency actually lives.

Cycling has one of the richest social ecosystems of any fitness activity. You don't have to ride alone — and honestly, you probably shouldn't, especially when you're starting out. Here's where the community is:

- **Local cycling clubs** — Most cities (especially here in NYC) have active cycling clubs that welcome all levels. Many have beginner-specific group rides.
- **Group spin classes** — The energy in a packed spin room is genuinely motivating. A good instructor makes you do things you didn't think you could do.
- **Charity rides** — Events like NYC's Five Boro Bike Tour give you a goal to train toward and a community to train with.
- **Apps like Strava** — Track your rides, join virtual clubs, cheer on friends, and compare routes. It turns every ride into a shared experience.

- **A cycling buddy** — Even just one person to ride with on Tuesday mornings changes everything. Accountability is the hidden ingredient in every successful fitness habit.

Studies consistently show that people who exercise with others or as part of a community have dramatically higher adherence rates over the long term. Finding your cycling people isn't just fun — it's a fitness strategy.

How to Get Started (Without Overthinking It)

Okay, you're convinced. Now what? Here's exactly how to start — simple, practical, no overthinking required.

- **Start small and build up.** Aim for 15-20 minutes, 3 times a week. That's it. You can always add more once it becomes a habit you actually enjoy.
- **You don't need expensive gear.** A basic bike — road, hybrid, or stationary — is all you need. Don't let anyone tell you otherwise. Gear upgrades come later, if at all.
- **Wear a helmet. Non-negotiable.** I don't care how short the ride is. Helmet on, every single time.
- **Set your seat height correctly.** Your leg should be almost fully extended at the bottom of the pedal stroke — a slight bend in the knee. Wrong seat height causes knee pain and kills performance. Get it right first.
- **Go at your own pace.** Ignore what anyone else is doing. Your ride is your ride. There's no minimum speed to qualify as a "real cyclist."
- **Track your progress.** Use your phone, a fitness watch, or an app like Strava. Seeing the numbers improve week over week is one of the most motivating things in fitness.

- **Most importantly — just start.** The perfect bike, the perfect weather, the perfect time — none of it matters if you're still sitting on the couch waiting for it. Get on a bike. Today.

Quick-Start Weekly Plan (Beginner)

Week 1-2: 15-20 min, 3x/week at easy, conversational pace

Week 3-4: 25-30 min, 3x/week — add a small hill if you can

Week 5-6: 30-40 min, 3-4x/week — start feeling like a cyclist

The Bottom Line

Cycling strengthens your heart, tones your muscles, protects your joints, lifts your mood, and connects you to a community of people who genuinely love what they do. There are very few workouts in the world that check that many boxes at once.

The best workout is always the one you'll actually do — consistently, over time, without dreading it. And from what I've seen working with clients here in New York City, cycling might just be that workout for you.

So here's my challenge: get on a bike this week. Once. 20 minutes. That's all I'm asking. See how you feel when you get off. I think you'll surprise yourself.

Ready to Ride?

If this post got you fired up, I want to hear about it. Drop a comment

below and tell me — are you a cyclist already, or is this your sign to start? Share your cycling journey, your questions, or your favorite NYC bike route.

And if you found this helpful, share it with a friend who keeps saying they want to "get into fitness." Sometimes one good article is all it takes to flip the switch.

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