16 TIPS FOR PREVENTING MOUNTAIN BIKE INJURIES

While we're not saying we can stop you getting mountain bike injuries, you can reduce your time off the bike with these simple steps. Injuries through crashes are not really avoidable, but developing better riding skills, watching your speed and focusing on the terrain, can help prevent a crash and potential injury. Fatigue, both mental and physical, affects your concentration and ability to balance and adjust your body according to the trail. This can contribute to a fall, so ensuring your body is strong, well-trained and well-fuelled can go a long way to reducing injury risk.

If you follow the tips below you can reduce your chances of injury.

1 WARM UP BEFORE EACH RIDE

Tight muscles can lead to torn muscles, but a proper warm-up and cool-down will save you the soreness. Spending the first 10-15 minutes going easy, you'll steadily increase blood flow, flexibility and range of motion.

And don't forget to cool down – a progressive decrease in pace will remove the waste products that inhibit recovery. Off the bike, use a foam roller post-ride to help you loosen up tired muscles, and increase blood flow and mobility, just go slow and be gentle on the sore spots. Stretching before and after a ride can ensure good posture on the bike and good joint mobility which in turn contributes to performance on the bike and reduces your risk of injury. Your physical therapist can give you specific stretches for your body.

2 DON'T SKIMP ON REST DAYS

Muscular and cellular adaptation to training actually takes place during down-time, so don't be fooled into thinking it won't matter if you skip rest days. Overtraining can cause muscle damage that leads to a reduction in strength and endurance as well as disrupting your sleep and immune function.

Schedule in a couple of rest days a week and watch out for symptoms of overtraining, such as disturbed sleep, loss of concentration, excessive muscle soreness or a higher than normal resting heart rate. Active rest can also mean light cross-training, like doing a swim session or light walk. Massage is also a key element in rest and recovery. Your massage therapist can also pick up any niggling areas of tightness that could predispose to an injury.

3 FUEL PROPERLY FOR EVERY RIDE

An empty tank is one of the primary causes of hitting the wall during long rides, but running on empty doesn't just wreck your performance, it's also associated with injury damage to muscle fibres.

Choose slow-release carbs like oats, wholegrain bread and sweet potatoes at each meal to drip-feed your muscles energy, and aim to consume 30-60 grams of carbs in the form of energy supplements every hour during rides which last more than an hour. Solid foods and sports drinks are equally effective, so choose what feels most comfortable to you.

4 PRE-RIDE CHECK

Before setting out on any ride always give your bike and other equipment a once-over check. This is especially important if you transported your bike in a car to the start of a route. Always check both wheels are securely fastened and that the brakes and gears are working. Bike maintenance and regular servicing of brakes, tread and tire pressure are important in preventing an accident.

5 WEAR A CYCLE HELMET

Never cycle without a helmet … more than 80% of cycling-related deaths are due to head injuries which could have been avoided if a helmet had been worn. It is simply not worth the risk.

6 WEAR CYCLE GLASSES

Glasses offer invaluable eye protection against wind, mud, dirt, sand, insects and branches. Many riders opt to wear sunglass-style glasses but the nature of mountain biking means you may pass through densely wooded areas as well as open terrain and you will struggle to see anything in the depths of a dark wood. Some glasses are available with interchangeable coloured lenses which are great for recreational riding if you have time to stop and change lenses. For competitive riding it's a good idea to ride with clear-lensed glasses which offer eye protection and clear visibility at all times.

7 KNEE AND ELBOW PADS

Many mountain bikers wear protective knee and elbow pads to help prevent traumatic injuries in the event of a fall. You should make sure the pads will not affect your pedalling ability or steering control of the bike.

8 CARRY OUT A 'RECCE' BEFORE A DOWNHILL SECTION

If you are riding in an unfamiliar area it is always well-worth dismounting from your bike and inspecting a downhill section on foot before committing to it on the bike. Quite often dangerous obstacles can be hidden on steep ground and if you hurtle down an unknown hill then the first time you see a hidden danger might be too late.

9 AVOID WRIST AND HAND INJURIES

It is common to have aching wrists and hands after a prolonged biking session. These pains are caused by the many shocks, vibrations and impacts traveling up through the forks, as well as by the hands not altering position for prolonged periods. Wrist and hand pains and injuries can be avoided by ensuring your suspension forks

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are well-maintained and serviced and wearing good biking gloves with padding. Fitting bar ends allows you to move your hands around more freely and adopt more efficient biking positions. Remember to take your hands off the handlebars occasionally and shake them to restore circulation. Padded gloves can also reduce the pressure on your hands.

10 KEEP WELL-HYDRATED

Both heat stroke and exhaustion can be caused to by not being sufficiently hydrated. Make sure you drink plenty of water prior to your ride but also during your ride. 'Hands-free' hydration systems such as CamelBak, Platypus or similar designs offer significant advantages over water bottles.

11 RIDE WITHIN YOUR SKILL LEVEL

Never listen to your buddies when it comes to a section of trail you think is above your ability. Get off and walk that section if needs be or take it really slow. There is no shame in being safe. Plan to ride with friends of similar ability and preferably review the trail/plan before the ride, so you know what to expect.

12 COMMON SENSE ISN'T ALL THAT COMMON

Use common sense and intuition to avoid situations that in the back of your mind you sense are maybe not the smartest move. Remember any ride you walk away from was a good ride and your riding skills and trail knowledge are what determines a good ride.

13 TOO MUCH, TOO SOON

Errors in training are a factor in injury development, especially overuse injuries. Regardless of your experience you should slowly and gradually build up your riding time/mileage. Take care not only with duration of your rides but also intensity – this can include speed or doing too many hills and climbs with insufficient fitness. It's tempting to take advantage of a good weather window or a weekend warrior scenario, but this can often lead to injury.

14 PREPARE YOUR BODY

Riding fitness is obviously best achieved through riding however a huge component of injury prevention is preparing your body.

- Upper and lower body eccentric and isometric strength training of your arms and shoulders as well as your glutes, thigh and buttock muscles is essential. A strong stable pelvis can help prevent knee pain.
- Core abdominal strength will not only help prevent lower back pain but also improve your ability to balance and shift your weight on the bike potentially preventing a fall and injury.
- Focus on functional movements rather than isolated exercises, for example squats, lunges and plyometric exercises are good for strengthening your legs.
- Enhance your endurance by challenging your aerobic and anaerobic capacity with interval training and cross-training like swimming, running, or rowing

Your physical therapist is best equipped to prescribe exercises for you. Every person is different with underlying muscle weaknesses, imbalances and occupational considerations, all of which can affect your riding ability and increase your risk of developing an overuse injury.

15 KNOW GOOD BODY POSITIONING

Stay centred in your cockpit, with your weight evenly distributed between your front and back wheels. This requires moving your body back and forth in the cockpit as you climb/descend, and will help you stay on your bike (as opposed to off it, on the ground).

16 GET OUT OF YOUR SADDLE

One of the most common mistakes beginners make is always staying seated. Getting out of your saddle takes the weight off your saddle and onto your pedals, moving your centre of gravity lower and making you more stable (think Formula One car low to the ground, versus double-decker bus). So, when the going gets rough (ie. technical terrain) or when you're going over undulating terrain, get out of your saddle.



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