

Fit Facts™

FROM THE AMERICAN COUNCIL ON EXERCISE®

Spin It: What You Need to Know About Group Indoor Cycling

SOME CALL IT TORTUROUS, others exhilarating. But there's no denying the popularity of group indoor cycling. 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 (many classes are so popular that reservations are a must) and start composing your victory speech, there are 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, right).

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. And because not all fitness facilities are able to offer classes tailored for beginning exercisers, it's important that participants either be in very good cardiovascular condition, or have the ability 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 higher-intensity cycling (faster speed, greater tension) with more leisurely pedaling.



What a Workout!

An ACE-sponsored study revealed that exercisers in a typical group indoor cycling class reported an exertion level in the high teens (using Borg's Rating of Perceived Exertion, a scale from 6 to 20) throughout most of the class. In addition, heart-rate measurements indicated that participants were exercising close to their maximum heart rate, which validated their perceptions that they were working hard. Clearly, group indoor cycling classes provide a challenging, high-intensity workout.

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 running shorts or heavy sweats—there's no better way to make your ride unbearable. Opt instead for bike shorts, preferably padded ones like most outdoor cyclists wear. While this won't eliminate the possibility of chaffing and discomfort altogether, it helps—a lot.
- Your second most important item: a full

water bottle. Get ready to consume plenty of fluids before, during and immediately following your workout.

- 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 and your legs will tire out faster. 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.
- Ask your instructor about his or her training. In addition to cycling knowledge, they should have experience teaching group exercise and have earned 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.
- 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 slow down or take a break when necessary.

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