



# TORTURE DEVICE OR BICYCLE? BIKE FIT FOR WOMEN



by Erin Fanning

It was five minutes that changed my life. Learning how to fit a bike to a woman's body took me from cycling agony to victory.

Unfortunately, not all women encounter bike store employees as knowledgeable and helpful as I did. Even women who have been riding for years suffer unnecessarily with an uncomfortable seat or awkward reach. There are a few simple things that women can do to either upgrade their current bicycle or make sure that a new bike fits properly.

## BODY DIFFERENCES

First, it is important to understand a few basic differences between men's and women's bodies, beyond the obvious one. In general, women have longer legs and shorter torsos than men. If you put a man and a woman of the same height on the same bicycle, the woman usually reaches farther for the handlebars, resulting in a sore neck and shoulders. The more obvious differences between men and women affect the way a woman sits on a bike saddle. Due to having a wider pelvis, women have a tendency to push back on traditional saddles, increasing the reach to the handlebars.

## BIKE STORES

It is important to find a store that

has employees that are knowledgeable about fitting bikes to women. Jacquie Phelan, pioneer mountain bike racer and founder of the Women's Mountain Bike and Tea Society (see more information), says that if given a choice go with the store that employs women, but, since that's often not an option, select a store that makes you feel welcome.

The cycling world is still male dominated and it isn't unusual to receive condescending treatment. Once while picking up my mountain bike after a major and expensive repair job, the 18-year-old bike mechanic proceeded to give me a lecture on preventative maintenance and how to cycle correctly. Little did he know that I had well over a decade of hard riding behind me from long distance touring to climbing thousands of feet on rugged Western singletrack. I doubt he would have given my husband the same lecture. There are plenty of bike stores to choose from so select one that treats you with respect.

## HEIGHT

Correct clearance over the top tube is one of the most important aspects of a proper fit. You should clear a mountain bike by 2 to 4 inches. Once you are sure that the clearance is correct, check the seat height. The seat should be high enough to almost

straighten your leg while pedaling. Make sure that while you pedal you're not rocking your hips from side-to-side trying to reach the pedals. On the other hand, you don't want the seat too low, resulting in sore knees.

## REACH

The next important aspect of fit is the reach. This is where women most often end up with a poor-fitting bicycle since even tall women usually have shorter arms than men. Your arms should always be slightly bent while riding. Even a minor reaching problem can result in back and shoulder pain after a few hours of riding. Reaching for the handlebars also puts pressure on parts of your crotch that might make you hang up your bike for good. As Phelan says, "You don't want to steer with your nails."

There are several adjustments that can correct a reach problem. A shorter stem and adjusting the fore-to-aft saddle position can sometimes rectify it. There are even brake levers made for cyclists with shorter arms and smaller hands.

There is a quick test to see if you are reaching too far. Touch your elbow to the front of the saddle, extending your arms towards the handlebars. Measure how far your

fingers are from the handlebars. If the distance is more than 3 to 4 inches, you might want to make some adjustments. The key is that a good bike salesperson or mechanic knows all about adjustments that can be made to bicycles. If they don't, go somewhere else for assistance.

## SEATS

**IF YOU FIND YOURSELF SQUIRMING ON YOUR BIKE SEAT LOOKING FOR A COMFORTABLE POSITION, THEN YOUR SADDLE IS PROBABLY WRONG FOR YOUR BODY.**

For many women, the long, narrow saddles that come with most bikes are torture devices. Don't get me wrong there is usually some soreness after a long ride or your first tour of the season. However, if

you find yourself squirming on your bike seat looking for a comfortable position, then your saddle is probably wrong for your body.

Luckily, there are many models to try. Avocet and Terry have been designing women-specific saddles for years. Get the super-wide saddle resembling an elephant seat out of your mind. These bike seats still look sleek, but they have subtle design features that make them more comfortable.

Some seats, however, are not so subtle, like the saddles with cutouts where certain parts of the female anatomy hit the seat. The best thing to do is test out several saddles before settling on one. Some people even find they prefer the hard-as-a-

rock, skinny saddles.

### GEARHEADS

Finally, never listen to the advice of gearheads. You know who I'm talking about. The cyclists that have all the flashy gizmos, but you rarely see them riding. They'll try to talk you into the latest and the greatest.

Stick with what is comfortable to you. That goes for any bicycle accessory, including toe clips or the clipless system that you snap into like a ski binding. Phelan, who has decades of riding under her belt, prefers to use toe clips, even though the trend leans towards clipless pedals. There are also a wide variety of padded cycling shorts now available, not just the tight-fitting lycra. The point is, don't let trends dictate how you set up your bicycle or the accessories you select.

However, there is one trend that you can't do without. Always wear a helmet, whether you are on a quick

jaunt to the store or a multi-day tour.

Bonnie Wegner, a Seattle area bike mechanic, tells a true story during her bike maintenance seminars about a man who jumped on his bicycle to run a quick errand. Since his destination was only a few blocks away, he left his helmet at home. The car that hit his bicycle left him brain damaged.

### FREEDOM

Ultimately, the correct bike fit gives you the freedom to enjoy long rides on Michigan's rolling side roads or dirt trails. Susan B. Anthony said that the bicycle did "more to emancipate women than anything else in the world." Bicycling in the late 1800s led to a clothing revolution and the acceptance of women as athletes. Don't let an uncomfortable bike take that freedom away.

*Erin Fanning is a freelance writer in Alanson, Michigan.*

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## WOMAN'S CYCLING FYI:

### Terry Precision Bicycles for Women

[www.terrybicycles.com](http://www.terrybicycles.com); 1.800.289.8379

Leading the way in women's bicycle design and accessories is Terry Bicycles, founded by Georgena Terry in 1985. Terry has "nurtured along a starving market," Phelan says.

### Women's Mountain Bike and Tea Society

[www.wombats.org](http://www.wombats.org); 415.459.0980

Founded by Jacquie Phelan, this national organization encourages women to explore mountain biking through advice, clinics and general support.

### Team Estrogen

[www.teamestrogren.com](http://www.teamestrogren.com); 503.641.5476

Sells a variety of biking apparel for women. Also offers a free online newsletter.

### BicycleSource.com

<http://www.bicyclesource.com/you/women/>

General information for women riders from diet to buying a saddle.

## Continental Bike Shop

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