A CYCLIST'S GUIDE TO
INJURY PREVENTION

# Cycling-related low back pain

**IS IT OK** to ride through low back pain or should you stop and seek medical help? Physio and osteopath *Lewis Wood* explains

Mechanical low back pain (LBP) is the most common physical complaint among cyclists. The exact causes can be difficult to diagnose, and many cyclists are given general 'soft' advice: take things easy, rest, lower your gear ratios, use a high cadence, etc. However, treatment and management of the pain — and whether to rest or carry on riding — should be determined by a trained practitioner based on the specific type of low back pain you are experiencing.

### What's causing the pain?

Often cyclists presume that their low back ache is caused by a simple muscular problem brought on by over-training or jarring the back. In fact, the problem is usually mechanical. When spinal muscle-fibres strain, they pull on the wings of a spinal joint called facet joints. There's a pair of facet joints at each of the five lumbar vertebrae — almost like having two spines in parallel. These muscle attachments act like a puppet on a string and can manipulate the facet joints in any direction. Therefore, if a deep spinal muscle is strained by a sudden movement or micro-trauma (repetitive movements), then a taut thickened muscle band will develop. This taut band is liable to pull the facet joint out of its correct position and change the alignment of not just the lower five vertebrae but often your pelvis and mid-back too — resulting in pain, inflammation and restricted movement.

### What is the lumbar spine?

The lumbar spine is the lower section of your vertebral column. It is comprised of five large vertebral segments. Its primary function is to provide stability, strength and power for movement, yet its well-engineered structure protects the spinal cord, existing nerves and abdominal contents. Large intervertebral discs act as shock-absorbers and are a very common source of back pain, since they dehydrate (thin) through degeneration or injury (disc bulge or prolapse).

### Can I carry on cycling?

It's advisable to rest for the first four to five days after the initial onset of LBP and wait for the first inflammatory phase to subside. You should not attempt cycling if the pain is too severe (difficultly turning over in bed or unable to stand up straight); when you experience referred pain down your legs (sciatica); or tingling/numbness in your feet.

In some cases, back pain can be due to a serious problem or disease, so if severe pain persists, consult a physio, osteopath or GP.


THE EXPERT

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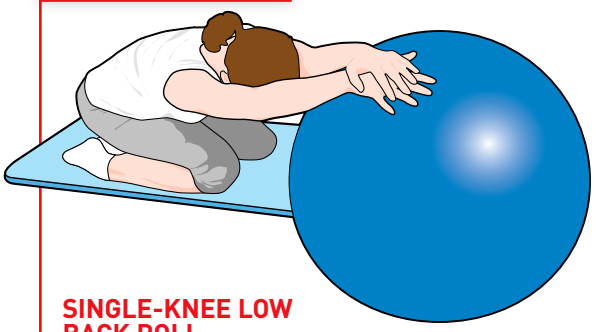
SELF HELP

## Self-help exercises

It's not all bad news: research has shown that cyclists who regularly work on their back flexibility can reduce their risk of experiencing low back pain. Complete these exercises pre/post-ride and 24 hours after each ride.

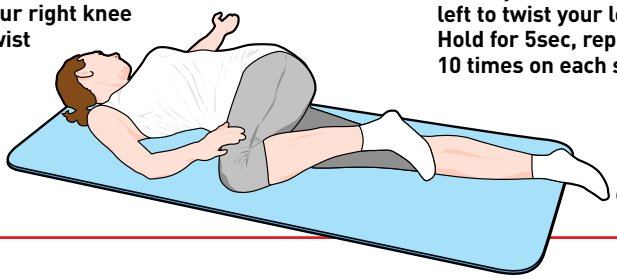


### DIAGONAL TRUNK STRETCH

**While sitting on your heels, place your right hand on the left side of the Swiss ball, put your other hand on top. Then roll the Swiss ball forwards and over to the left to create a diagonal stretch for your right trunk. Hold for 5sec, repeat up to 10 times per side.**

### SINGLE-KNEE LOW BACK ROLL

**Lie on your back with your right knee bent and heel on left shin. With your left hand, pull your right knee across your body to twist and 'open' your lower back. Turn your neck towards the right. Hold for 5sec, repeat up to 10 times on each sides.**



### LONG SEATED LOW-BACK TWIST

**Sit with your right leg out straight in front of you. Bend your left knee then cross your foot over the right leg. Place your right elbow against your outer left knee and slowly rotate your shoulders to the left to twist your lower back. Hold for 5sec, repeat up to 10 times on each sides.**

Illustrations: Jason Hardy