

Excess baggage?

Long or hilly cycle rides are easier the less weight you're carrying. Sports scientist Joe Beer offers advice on getting leaner

Last issue we looked at healthy fats. Too much body fat, however, is something that few of us want. Cyclists are likely to be only slightly overweight at most, rather than obese, but we have an extra incentive to get bodyweight within recommended limits: the lighter you and your bike are, within reason, the easier cycling is. That's particularly true uphill or over longer distances.

It's tempting to lose weight from the bike first, and if you're prepared to pay enough you could indeed lose 2kg by swapping your 10kg road bike for a 8kg model. Before you open your wallet, it's worth asking: 'Could I lose 2kg of fat instead?' For many (but not all) cyclists, the answer will be yes. What's more, losing 2kg of fat will be free.

Focus on why you're losing weight. It's not an abstract goal. The aim is to make your cycling easier and/or more enjoyable, to improve long-term health, and to give you greater motivation to get out on your bike. (If none of those things apply, maybe you don't need to lose any weight?)

LET'S TALK FIGURES

There are a variety of ways to check your body fat. Visual checking is cheap, painfully honest and easy to do. All you need is a mirror. At the other end of the scale, bio-impedance machines are high-tech, accurate but expensive. Whatever method is used, you need to get a benchmark to compare against and a realistic time scale to set yourself.

The difficult part is defining what is fat and what is lean. Tour riders are around 5-9% fat and have loads of visible veins; it's their job to be that skinny. On the other hand, the average person in the street is much more fat: men 16-20%, women 20-25%. Fat levels higher than this can be dangerous because high levels of body fat are often associated with high levels of fat circulating in the



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blood. You may not be out of the norm at the moment but as fat is easily gained in an almost invisible process, you cannot ignore it.

Forget fad diets. You have three choices to lose fat:

1. Do more riding and daily activities, so that you increase your calorie use.
2. While still having nutrient-rich foods, eat fewer calories.
3. Do a combination of both 1 & 2, so you've got fewer calories in *and* more out.

The first is the more enjoyable of the three. Two is pointless on its own without exercise – you'll get thinner but won't see fitness improvements. Number three is the most effective.

To lose fat you must ride consistently. Have fun while you do it and very occasionally ride hard to get that top-end buzz. Don't starve yourself while riding. It's still worth using a sports drink when rides go beyond an hour or two. This allows maintenance of blood glucose, feeding the exercising muscles and your brain. This will boost endurance without significantly affecting fat loss.

I know many fat-conscious individuals think 'I cannot eat or drink calories while riding. I'll get fat.' But, while carbohydrate solutions during and after exercise may reduce fat mobilisation slightly, you'll ride longer and more consistently. The trade-off is worth it.

EAT LIKE A LEAN MACHINE

1. Eat 5-6 times a day (300-400 calories) rather than wait until the evening to catch up your calorie needs.
2. Drink a glass of water before each mini-meal.
3. Reduce bad fats (hydrogenates, saturates) but include quality fats (olive oil, oily fish, linseed).
4. Reduce refined sugars in favour of fibrous foods that require chewing (potatoes, rice, apples, yams, pasta).
5. Minimise alcohol intake – it stores fat way too easily for most to get away with it.
6. Buy a quality multi-vitamin and the best-quality food you can afford.
7. Do not starve yourself (i.e. no fewer than 1500-1800 calories per day). You'll plummet your metabolism and store fat easier when you do eat normally later on.
8. Don't expect results overnight. Fat goes on and comes off very slowly. Consistency counts.