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# SITTING PRETTY?



*Saddle discomfort is a sure-fire way to ruin your ride. We speak to the bike-fitting experts to find out the secret to pain-free cycling*

Cyclists love nothing more than to geek out with each other about anything to do with their sport. Well, almost anything. Saddle discomfort – and its associated problems – might give even the most evangelical rider pause in sharing. As Tammy Corney, owner of Cognition Bike Fit and a British Cycling coach, says: “Asking a retail assistant for saddle suggestions because you have big blisters on your labia, are recovering from recent prostate surgery or experiencing erectile dysfunction is embarrassing.”

Despite appearances, saddles are a very complex and important bike component and should not be overlooked. And while a bike saddle will never feel like sitting on an armchair, you shouldn't experience pain. As Matt Hallam, sports scientist and owner of bike fit specialist Crimson Performance says: “If cyclists are wanting to get off the bike at any point in a ride because their saddle is uncomfortable, that's a red flag to have a bike fit. Discomfort can be a multitude of things, whether numbness, saddle sores or too much pressure on the sit bones, for example. Everyone will have



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**Matt Hallam** Sports scientist and owner of Crimson Performance

a different view of what saddle comfort might feel like.”

Women tend to suffer more than men when it comes to saddle issues. Phil Burt spent 12 years as the head of physiotherapy at British Cycling, as well as five years as consultant physiotherapist at Team Sky, and is founder of Phil Burt Innovation, which includes the world's first saddle health clinic. He says, in his experience, women often have



Details such as padding distribution and cutout shape can differ hugely from one saddle to another



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Happy Freedman Director, The Centre for Bike Fit in New York

more saddle discomfort than men, partly because they tend to have wider hips. “That said, you will get some men with enormous sit bones and women who have tiny ones.”

Burt adds that women also have much more varied soft-tissue presentation in their genitalia than men. “Finding the right shape and type of saddle to accommodate that can often be more problematic than with men, who tend to have more similar genitalia,” says Burt.

However, there has been a move away from gender-specific saddles in recent years. Emma Boutcher, product manager for saddles at Specialized says that when her company launched the Mimic saddle in 2018, it made much of the fact that the product had been designed following development and testing with women, and was

marketed to women. It has since removed that focus following the product’s huge popularity with men as well.

Happy Freedman, director at The Centre for Bike Fit in New York, who developed the first hospital-based clinical bike-fit programme in North America, agrees: “While saddles are marketed differently to men and women, I have found saddles from either category may be the ideal saddle for someone of the opposite sex. I therefore try to focus more on other characteristics rather than whether they are labelled as men’s or women’s.”

It can also be misleading to approach saddle ailments as being gender-specific (although some conditions are unique to one sex). Bianca Broadbent, a sports physio who was formerly lead practitioner

Above Most bike shops let you try out different saddles on the road

for biomechanics at the Boardman Performance Centre, and is now a physio at bike-fitting specialists Fit Your Bike, believes it is reductive to say ‘men have these problems and women have these’. “Although there may be some trends, there are a lot of individual considerations,” she says. “Therefore rather than taking a “male or female” approach, I’d usually take a “what is this person’s problem?” angle and work backwards from there.”

**Here’s the rub...**

So what questions should cyclists ask to make sure they choose the right saddle and overcome (or minimise the chance of) saddle sores or more complex problems?

Firstly, talk to a bike fitter about where the problem is occurring. “If a guy says he gets penile numbness then, OK, let’s try a gap saddle,” says Burt. “Women might say they have pain at the front so, have they got the right shorts, is the saddle in the right place, and then, is it the best saddle to cope with pressure at the front?”

Numbness, for example, indicates that there is likely to be pressure on the perineal nerve, the main nerve in the pelvis. This can result in penile and scrotal numbness for men, and vulval numbness for women. Cut-out saddles were introduced to relieve this pressure when riding. “What you’re doing is cutting off the blood flow and oxygen to sensitive tissue for an extended period of time,” says Boutcher. “A cut-out saddle can remove that contact area, enabling blood flow and preventing potential tissue damage.”

Pain where the thigh meets the groin is also common, and Burt says this is more often to do with the wrong saddle position or a saddle being too wide. “Working out what causes saddle issues, whether it’s pressure, friction or heat and moisture, for example, is a good starting point.”

Saddle sores also plague cyclists, caused by friction and chafing, and exacerbated by sweat. Common places are around either side of the pubic rami (pelvic bones that connect the sit bones – or ischial



Left: Cutouts can help take the pressure off delicate areas

tuberosity – to the pubic bones), and localised around the sit bones.

To help prevent boils, saddle sores and nodules, which can arise when hair follicles have swollen and hardened under pressure, Burt says that the most important thing to do after a cycle ride is to take off sweaty Lycra. “Put loose-fitting shorts on after a wash and use a moisturiser to help the skin recover.”

**Speed vs duration**

Finding the right saddle is also highly dependent on what type of riding a cyclist does. As Burt says, a time-trialist typically adopts a very aggressive position, with all the pressure in the front of the saddle, for instance. “That forward-rotated position means sit-bone difference doesn’t mean anything, but for more endurance riding [where you sit more upright], the saddle tends to

**Anatomy of a saddle**



- 1 BASE**  
This plastic, fibre-reinforced polymer or carbon fibre shell gives the saddle its basic shape and determines how much it will flex.
- 2 COVER**  
This is usually synthetic but can be leather and protects the padding underneath. Look out for seams that could cause discomfort.
- 3 NOSE**  
The nose is the longer, thinner bit at the front of the saddle and comes in varying lengths. The latest trend is for a shorter nose.
- 4 PADDING**  
Many saddles use variable-density foam or gel in pressure-mapped areas. Some even use memory foam, and few have no padding at all!
- 5 RAILS**  
These connect the saddle to the seatpost clamp and range from steel alloy to manganese alloys to titanium or carbon-fibre.
- 6 WIDTH**  
Many saddles come in a choice of widths. Go to a bike shop or look online to find out how to measure for your saddle width.

need to be more like a T-shape for comfort.”

Hallam says people who are racing and want more performance from their bike could consider reducing the density of padding on their saddle. It still needs to offer enough soft-tissue relief, but perhaps can allow a rider to front load as well. “Riders doing multi-day events or training for sports over 100 miles, however, will typically need something with a bit more padding to provide more support and comfort for their pelvis, in terms of sit-bone contact,” he adds. “But it is important to think about soft-tissue relief as well, with a cut-out allowing the rider to reduce pressure on the perineal nerve.”

But padding doesn't always equal comfort. Too much padding can leave the pelvis without sufficient support and increase soft-tissue pressure, so striking the balance between these two things is key. Sit bones, for example, should feel engaged on the saddle, but not under undue pressure.

Taking rider experience into account is also key. As Alex Locatelli, Product Manager at Fizik, says: “A new rider might require a different seat than a cyclist who is already used to a certain position.”

### The perfect fit

While some saddle issues can be alleviated with better shorts (and chamois), improved hygiene, or a saddle-height or angle adjustment,

there's no substitute for a bike fit if saddle discomfort on the bike persists, or if injuries recur.

An experienced specialist can help you fully understand where your saddle discomfort lies and how it manifests itself. The bike-fit expert can also take into account things like your height and build, what type of cycling you do and your individual preferences. Freedman says it's helpful to evaluate a cyclist's position and interaction with their bike and saddle, and determine whether

**Above** If you have saddle-comfort issues, a professional bike fitting is a must

the frame size and geometry are appropriate for the person and their riding style, technique and intended use.

Having a chat with the client and looking at the wear pattern on their current saddle can also give clues as to potential issues to address. “Have related issues such as scoliosis, weak core or pelvic floor been identified and addressed?” says Freedman. “Is their current saddle twisted or showing wear points on the surface corresponding with complaints related to saddle contact? Sometimes replacing the saddle does not eliminate the underlying problem. We may need to correct the cyclist's position before evaluating for a new saddle.”

One tool used within bike-fitting (and saddle design) is pressure mapping, such as Gebiomized's Pressure Mapping system, or Retul's Digital Sitbone Device, which both show where pressure is distributed on the saddle and assess a rider's contact with it. But most specialists advocate using this as part of a multi-disciplinary approach.

Burt says he'll never change a saddle or position based on one finding alone, but saddle pressure helps to build the whole picture.



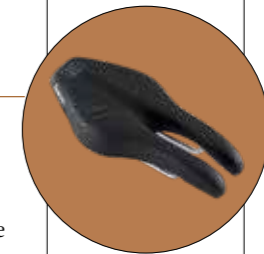
**“A time-trialist typically adopts a very aggressive position, with all the pressure in the front of the saddle so sit-bone difference doesn't mean anything, but for more endurance riding, the saddle tends to need to be more like a T-shape for comfort”**

Phil Burt Founder of Phil Burt Innovation

“For example, a cyclist might have a right-sided saddle sore – humans are asymmetrical and cycling is completely asymmetrical, so do they have a functional leg-length difference? Unless you address that and level the person up on the saddle – by reducing crank length, for example – it doesn't matter what saddle they have, they'll be leaning.”

Following a bike fit, it is important to try different saddles

on the road, when you are moving around and adopting different positions at varying intensity and duration. Many cycle shops offer a 30-day comfort guarantee, so take advantage of this. As Corney says, it is important for riders to familiarise themselves with how their unique physiology interacts with a saddle. “Will your soft tissue adapt to less



**Above** Comfort at the front of the saddle is important in time trialling

cushioning? This can take time, so what might feel like a piece of 2” x 4” this week might feel fine in a few months' time.”

Different riders also have their own 'loading patterns' – i.e. whether they prefer to load the front of their pelvis or the rear. Broadbent says, “riders who prefer to load the nose may want something with a broader structure at the front (but not always), whereas riders who prefer more rearward loading may like something that has a broader rear.”

The price tag of the saddle doesn't necessarily guarantee comfort either. “The more expensive saddles are nearly always lighter,” says Burt. “I'd argue that the weight has nothing to do with how comfortable you are on a bike, so if you're not worried about that, invest where technology is giving you the most comfort.” [GUS](#)



## Unseated: common saddle-related conditions

### Men

- Chronic prostatitis (ongoing inflammation of the prostate)
- Irritation of dorsal nerve of the penis (pain or tingling anywhere from the tailbone to the tip of the penis)

### Women

- Vulvodynia (persistent pain in the vulva)

### Both sexes

- Chronic Pelvic Pain Syndrome (ongoing pain in the pelvic area)
- Pudendal Neuralgia (long-term pelvic pain that originates from damage or irritation of the pudendal nerve – a main nerve in the pelvis)
- Irritation of Posterior Cluneal Nerve (entrapment of sensory nerves in the upper part of the buttocks

- causing tenderness at the iliac crest rim, just above the dimple at the buttock)
- Proctalgia Fugax (severe, episodic pain in the regions of the rectum and anus)
- Recurrent Urinary Tract Infections (including pain or burning when urinating, or frequent urge to urinate)

### At a glance: common symptoms

#### Men

- Penile numbness
- Scrotal numbness
- Pain whilst urinating
- Perineum soreness
- Erectile dysfunction

#### Women

- Vulval numbness
- Vulval pain
- Dyspareunia (painful intercourse)