

Bone density

Cyclists' bone status stresses osteoporosis. *by Karen Giles-Smith*

Athletes are considered the epitome of physical fitness, but there's one part of a competitive cyclist's body that may not be healthy and strong: *their bones.*

Bone is living tissue that is constantly under construction: Old bone cells are cleared and new bone cells are laid down, adding mass and strength to bones. One factor that stimulates the addition of new bone cells is the physical pressure of weight-bearing activities such as walking, dancing and jumping rope. Bones also need certain nutrients to grow and stay strong such as calcium, vitamin D, protein and potassium. Compared to runners and weight lifters, competitive cyclists are more likely to have low bone density. In fact, many cyclists—some in their 20s—have osteopenia, or softening of the bone, which may lead to osteoporosis.

Cyclists with low bone density are more likely to endure fractures from falls and crashes. The nature of competitive cycling makes low bone density more

likely. On a bicycle, the skeleton bears only a small amount of impact since the body doesn't repeatedly come in contact with a hard surface. Many competitive cyclists focus solely on their sport and don't participate in weight-bearing activities. Also, many cyclists have a low body weight which means the skeleton carries a light load. In addition, excessive sweating may lead to increased calcium losses, which may not be completely replenished through diet.

Recreational cyclists probably don't need to be overly concerned about their bones. Competitive cyclists, however, should spend time cross-training. Experts recommend competitive cyclists incorporate weight training, hiking, running or jumping rope during the season as well as off-season.

The state of competitive cyclists' bones emphasizes the importance of weight-bearing physical activity and proper nutrition to keep bones healthy and avoid osteoporosis. For most people, osteoporosis is preventable. Prevention is key because, although osteoporosis is

treatable, there is no cure.

For more information and to download a free Bone Tool Kit, visit www.nof.org.

The National Osteoporosis Foundation offers five tips for bone health.

- Get your daily recommended amounts of calcium and vitamin D
- Engage in regular weight-bearing exercise
- Avoid smoking and excessive alcohol
- Talk to your healthcare provider about bone health
- When appropriate, have a bone density test and take medication

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