

Part 2 – Stretches for the Back

This set of stretches is to help with back ache after a day on the bike. When in a flexed position for long periods the muscles in the back can get fatigued and tighten. This can lead to back pain after cycling often felt 3-4 inches up from the base on the spine. Back pain is reported by 30% of cyclists and up to 80% of the population in general will have some back trouble during their life. If you suffer from back problems at times when not on the bike seek medical advice before undertaking any of these stretches.

Causes of back pain can be due to extra effort when cycling such as pushing harder gears, cycling in strong headwinds, or upping training loads, but can also be due to bike position, poor core stability, as well as problems with the joints, disks, nerves, pelvis alignment and leg length discrepancy.

The spine sits on the pelvis. This means that the position of the pelvis is important because if it is not correctly aligned it can contribute to back pain. The position of the pelvis is determined by some of the leg muscles and the gluteal muscles. Tight quadriceps can tilt it forward compressing the spine, and tight hamstrings tilt it backwards increasing tension in the muscles and ligaments along the spine. The hip flexor can also be a key culprit in back ache as it originates in the lower back where it attaches to the spine before passing through your pelvis and attaching to your hip. Tight hip flexors tilt the pelvis forward. Hip flexors also tighten up when sitting, so desk based jobs, driving and sedentary lifestyles as well as cycling can cause them to tighten and shorten. Tight gluteals reduce hip flexibility and also can be a cause of deep buttock pain and back pain after cycling.

When out on the bike try changing your position to give you some relief from back pain e.g. changing hand position occasionally from the drops to the hoods, moving forward or backwards on the saddle, sitting up and stretching, or doing some pelvic tilts.

Between training and racing stretching is important to ensure that you are flexible, short tight muscles are lengthened and to help with correct pelvis alignment.

If your back ache continues after stretching consider three things:

- Work on your core stability to strengthen the back so it can withstand the long periods in a flexed position. Core strength and conditioning is extremely important as a method to prevent injury and should be a part of all cyclists training regimes.
- Visit a physical therapist to get an assessment and treatment for pelvic and muscle imbalances or other issues such as joint or disc that may be causing the back pain.
- Check your bike set up and get a proper fit as top tube length and handle bar positioning as well as the saddle tilt can contribute to back pain.

Stretches for the hamstrings, quadriceps, hip flexor and gluteals were shown in Part 1 of this stretching series. These should be added to your back stretching program if you don't already do them.

It can be difficult to stretch the back itself so I will show multiple stretches that you can try and see which works best for you. Some people may find that they don't feel a stretch when trying to stretch out their back. In this case the tennis ball self-massage technique may be more suitable.

Pelvic tilts

Tilting your pelvis forwards and backwards can help loosen out the base of the spine. You can do this sitting on the bike or standing.

Supine Stretch for the lower back

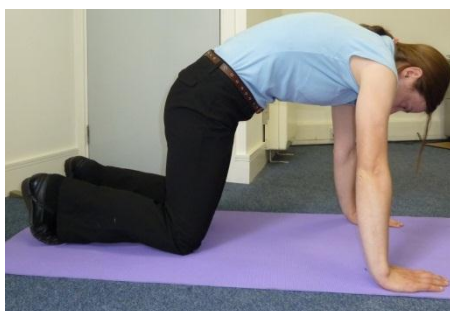
1. Lie on your back with your knees bent and feet flat on the floor
2. Hug one knee at a time to your chest. You should feel a stretch in the lower back. Hold this stretch for 30 seconds
3. Return the knee to the starting position and repeat on the opposite side.
4. Do three times on each side



Cat & Camel

This stretch helps to mobilise the lower back

1. Adopt apposition on your hands and knees with your neck straight (i.e. eyes to the floor)
2. Draw in your navel and arch your back up towards the sky as if you had a piece of string from the centre of your spine pulling you upwards. Hold this for 3 seconds
3. Now relax and allow your back to sink down. Hold this for 3 seconds
4. Repeat this 10-15 times until you feel your back loosen out



Back Twist Lying Down

1. Lie on the floor face up
2. Bend your knees up
3. Keeping your shoulders on the floor allow your bent knees to drop out to one side.
4. Hold this for 15 seconds
5. Return to the starting position and repeat on the opposite side
6. Do three times on each side



Back Twist Sitting

1. Sit on the floor with the left knee bent and right knee out straight
2. Cross the left leg over the right
3. Turn the upper body to the left. Hold this for 15 seconds
4. If you can, tuck the right elbow against the outside of the left knee
5. Repeat on the opposite side. Do three times on each side



Self-Massage with a Tennis Ball

Some cyclists report that they feel this is the best way to work out the ache in the back along either side of the spine. It can be done lying down or standing with your back against the wall. Doing this exercise against the wall can give you better control of the position of the tennis ball and the pressure you apply. Do not place the tennis ball on the spine itself; it should only be placed on muscle either side of the spine. Mild discomfort may be experienced so moderate the pressure to

level where the discomfort is tolerable but not painful. Do not do this exercise more than 3 times a week as you may aggravate the area. Performing the exercise against the wall give you better control of the pressure than performing it lying down.

1. Stand with your back against a wall and with your feet approx. 2 foot from the wall
2. Place a tennis ball between your back and the wall to one side of the spine. Move the tennis ball around until you feel it is at a tight area
3. Press your back into the ball until you feel a pressure that gives some relief. Holds this position for between 10-30 seconds.

To do on the floor, lie face up with your knees bent. Place a tennis ball as per step 2 above between your back and the floor in an area of discomfort. You can move your body up and down on the tennis ball to localise the correct area for the self-massage. When found hold this position for 10-30 seconds or move around on the ball, whichever you prefer.

