

Cycling at Any Age: What to Bear in Mind as You Grow Wiser

We asked an expert what we should be considering at each milestone

There are endless reasons that we love cycling, but one of the major pull factors for many people is that it's fairly easy on the joints compared to other activities – such as running. It's not uncommon to see a cycling club run that features riders across a wide range of age groups – from bright young things in their teens, to grey haired stalwarts who can recite the winners of every Tour de France and Giro over the last few decades.

Many riders can keep on pedalling into their 70s and 80s and beyond – our favourite example being [then] 77-year-old [Judy Robinson, who won TWC's Unsung Hero Award in 2015 having led well over 100 Breeze Network rides.](#)

All this said, as your body ages, things begin to change. The aging process is different for everybody, but there are some general rules of thumb and trends. We asked Lee Prescott, the director at [cycling bike fit, coaching and service studio Velo Atelier](#) to outline the considerations we should be taking at each milestone.

Precott, who has decades of experience fitting bodies to bikes and working with cycling coaches to help athletes reach their potential, tells us that the major changes start once we get to our 30s.

He explains: “As we get older, past 30, we do see some changes. Aerobic capacity – the ability for the heart and lungs to get oxygen to muscles – begins to decline. Body fat often increases, and muscle mass declines, as does mobility.”

However – hope is far from lost – he went on to say: “If you look after

yourself there is no reason why you can't still be enjoying your cycling well into your 80s and it is actually a great low impact exercise to prolong joint mobility and muscle range of motion."

We asked Prescott to break down the changes into age groups, here's what you need to think about as you age...

In your twenties

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Your strength is at the highest it will ever be between the age of twenty and thirty – Prescott tells us: “Now is the time to make the most of that and lay foundations for the years ahead” – of course you can also just enjoy being on top of the world!

It's worth working on flexibility in this time. Firstly, recovery times are shorter for you so you'll be able to rack up the miles, and with that in mind you need to look after your muscles to prevent tight spots causing imbalances.

Secondly, [flexibility will begin to decline](#) as you age. Prescott says: “it’s much better to start from a good position, and maintain it, than have to begin transforming yourself into a more bendy rider once you reach your later years.” He recommends pilates classes, a great way to work on targeted stretches and strengthening exercises.

In your twenties, you’re strong, but often a little too headstrong. It can be tempting to push your body too hard and this can result in [injury or illness from overtraining](#), so be sure to look after yourself.

In your thirties



Women are said to peak in their thirties – so if you’ve been training since your twenties then you’ll no doubt be ready to reap the rewards. Now is the best time to really focus on [training to suit your objectives](#), rather than just working on general fitness. [Targeted training](#) means results, and you’ve got a decade before the declines begin to show, so now is the time!

Some changes do start to take place – body fat can creep up, and this can

cause VO2 max to decrease. This is the maximum amount of oxygen that a person can utilize during exercise, and you'd spot the decline in efforts between two and five minutes. Keep working on these with targeted intervals – [this session from Katie Archibald is great!](#)

Finally, a lot of women consider having children in their 20s and more often 30s. You can continue to ride during pregnancy, and there are some studies that show having a baby actually increases your fitness and pain tolerance! However, you need to listen to your body, and your GP, and do what's right for you. Here's [some advice on riding during pregnancy](#), and a bit about [riding after you've had the baby, too.](#)

In your forties

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This is where you will start to notice the differences between yourself now, and your abilities in your spring chicken days. Prescott tells us: “If you're a data junkie, be aware that cardiac output drops as we get older.”

It's during this decade that 'middle age spread' can start to appear – body fat naturally increases and muscle mass can decline. However, you can

help to slow this down by working hard on nutrition, and spending [some time in the gym doing a few weights](#) to maintain or even boost muscle strength.

For women, bone strength becomes very important as menopause approaches, so some weight bearing gym work is a really great idea. Menopause can arrive at any age, but it's usually between 45 and 55 – [the average age is 51](#). Regardless when it happens, once these changes do start to take place, you might find hot flushes and fatigue from lost sleep get in the way of cycling a bit. Just remember your body is changing, and be gentle and patient with yourself.

Cycling however can really help the associated issues – Prescott tells us: “Cycling can actually offset many of the effects commonly associated with the reduction in Oestrogen and Progesterone. The exercise can boost endorphins which helps with anxiety.

“Much of the weight gain associated with the menopause is usually due to simply exercising less and diet becoming less healthy due to a shift in attitude. If you can use a cycling target to keep you focused on keeping the training and healthy nutrition going, then you are sure to find the whole process easier.”

As we age, our slow twitch (endurance) muscle fibres are barely lost, or lost much more slowly. It's the fast twitch (sprinting and short effort) muscle fibres that begin to decline. That's why we [often see women time trialling incredibly well at this age](#), but those taking part in road races or short, fast effort competitions might need to start thinking about becoming breakaway specialists to get the win.

If you're not racing, and just enjoying riding, but still want to maintain some speed then work on some short sharp sprints from time to time in training, but remember at this point your endurance abilities will be your shining glory.

In your fifties



At this point in life you're probably a bit wiser than your twenty year old self – you've hopefully learnt where your boundaries are, and are less likely to overdo it. This is good, because you do need to start prioritising recovery.

Prescott explains: “There are lots of studies that show if you have looked after yourself there is a minimal decline in performance up to the age of 50, if you have looked after yourself. Once in your 50s you may want to start to adapt your approach to cycling.”

This means that when you're aiming to increase your fitness or mileage, you should build up more slowly and target specific goals so as not to waste energy. You might not be able to easily maintain your best 'form' for months on end as you could in your youngest years, so choose specific events to aim towards and build up fitness with that date in mind.

Prescott advises: “If you have targets through the year start your training earlier and build it more slowly to allow adaptation. Take recovery from rides seriously... Your body will take longer to recover from efforts.”

In your sixties



Joint mobility starts to decrease around now, so Prescott advises that you work on ensuring your [bike fit is dialed to cater for changes](#). He says: “Now is the time to go and get a check of your position. Joint mobility will start to reduce and typically your natural leg and neck extension will likely be less. Also you may start finding it harder to hold your core stable. A slightly lower saddle position and more upright torso angle are typical changes at this age.”

It’s also a good idea to start doing a little bit of cross training now, and Prescott has one specific suggestion: “Nordic walking is a great way to maintain mobility in your shoulders, which cycling alone will not reach.”

There’s also one more observation he has to make, that you might not have considered. As we get older, it turns out we pee more – so he says: “Don’t forget to drink more while you are on the bike to avoid dehydration. Don’t forget if you feel thirsty you have already left it too late.”

If you're active, and have been for years, then the good news is you could well be running rings around people much younger than you! Prescott says: "In a recent study active men in their 70s had reaction times equivalent to inactive men in their 20s, so you should still be feeling the benefits of riding your bike regularly." The study wasn't repeated for women, but we reckon the effect would be similar if not greater in women (who do generally live longer...)

However, you do need to look after yourself as your [immune system](#) can need some extra help. Prescott says: "Look at your nutrition, you need plenty of fresh vitamins, and get outside in the sunlight. Something like echinacea can also sometime [help to give your system a little boost.](#)"

You might also start to feel road buzz a little more keenly if you ride a road bike, or the lumps and bumps off-road may start to affect you more. Prescott suggests moving from a 23c tyre to a 25c option on the road, and adjusting your suspension if you ride off-road.

In your eighties and beyond



Congratulations on staying active – the fact that you’re still getting out on a bike means you’ll be so much healthier, more mobile, and if we’re honest happier than those who are choosing to stick to more leisurely pursuits. You never did like lawn sports anyway, right?!

At this point, however, you do need to listen to the advice of professionals such as your GP. Aches and pains should be respected, and it’s well worth checking in with your doc for regular check-ups if you can.

Admittedly, you’re probably not going to be at your fastest now, so simply enjoy your cycling! You’ve put a lot of work in, and there’s no reason you can’t be riding well into your 90s. Long endurance rides are probably by far the best option – so pack your panniers, enjoy the views along the way, and take in as much of the world as your body and mind can digest.

There are so many amazing women cycling in their 20s, 30s, 40s, 50s, 60s, 70s, 80s, and beyond that. Of course, we can’t highlight every single one, but we have pulled together [some of the best examples of women doing amazing things within each decade of their lives here.](#)

Our expert Lee Prescott works at Velo Atelier – they provide bike fitting, physiotherapy, coaching, pilates classes and more – [check out the site here.](#)

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