

Bicycling



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Clip In, Ride On, Chill Out

If you haven't made the switch to clipless pedals, what are you waiting for?

By Jennifer Sherry

I remember my mounting frustration as my pedals spun on the cranks while my sneakered toes chased those strappy contraptions until they finally caught up and worked their way in--just in time to yank them back out when fear got the best of me. When I grew weary of the battle of the toe clip, I flipped the pedals cage-side down and rode with the clips and straps dragging along the trail, smacking rocks and chipmunks in their path. If I loosened the clips, my feet slid in and out with ease, but I lost pedal power. If I tightened them, I could zip up hills, but I spent more time lying on the trail--still attached to my bike. It was then that I knew the time had come to retire my medieval foot-jails and go clipless.

My first cleats and pedals were Shimano SPDs. I bought cycling shoes, put the cleats in place, attached my new pedals, and practiced. In and out, in and out. I had a harder time clipping in. I scraped my shoes across the pedals a dozen times, trying to get the cleats to engage--like a preteen struggling to get the hook side of her bra to grab the loop side. Finally, my feet clipped in.

I fell--sometimes because I wasn't used to the new system, others because I simply forgot I was attached to it. But after a few embarrassing and painful tumbles, I got the hang of it. Now I can't imagine riding anything but clipless. And when I meet other riders who fear what I feared, I always tell them the same thing: "Once you get used to it, you'll never go back."

What will you gain by going clipless?

Efficiency: With your feet attached to the pedals and your body attached to your feet, you become one with your bike, which means more of your energy makes its way to each pedal stroke, giving you more juice to climb and accelerate.

Power: Clipless pedals let you pull on the upstroke as efficiently as you push down, creating a smooth and constant application of power through each crank rotation. The only way to achieve this with toe clips is to snug them dangerously tight, and even then you won't have as smooth and steady a cadence as with clipless pedals.

Confidence: When clipping in and out becomes second nature, you'll begin to notice that your skills will improve, and you'll take more chances, knowing that you're only a quick foot-twist away from detaching yourself from a doomed bike.

Control: Clipless pedals let you pull your bike up off the ground to bunnyhop logs, curbs and potholes, and let you safely swerve around roadkill. And when you're rolling over a jagged rock garden, you can easily pop out a foot to dab. Plus, when you ditch the toe clips and straps, you lose the hassle of snagging debris on the trail or catching sticks between your pedal and shoe.

Freedom: Nearly all clipless pedal systems have float and tension adjustment. Float allows your foot to swivel a few degrees laterally to ensure that you don't injure your knees by having them locked into one position. Tension adjustment lets you control how hard or easy it is to get in and out of the pedal.

Practice Makes Clipless

SET UP: Follow your pedal manufacturer's instructions to set your cleat tension so entry and exit are as easy as they can be. Some brands and models have no release-tension adjustability, so ask before you buy.

TWIST: Stand over your bike and practice getting one foot in and out of the pedal by twisting your heel outward. Do this until it feels natural--50 times if you have to. Switch sides.

CRUISE: When you feel comfortable clipping in and out, go for a spin around your neighborhood or on a patch of grass. Practice clipping in and out as you roll.

STOP: Try coming to a complete stop as if you were riding in traffic. As you slow to a stop, clip one foot out and use it like a kickstand. Not feeling that confident yet? Stop next to a tree or telephone pole so you can grab it if you have to.

RIDE: Once you feel comfortable cruising your 'hood, clipping in and out, and stopping on a dime, show up at the next group ride looking like an old pro.

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