Respect the Undercarriage

by DR. MEG FISHER

One of the most common questions I receive is: “How can my bike seat be more comfortable so I can ride more?” Lots of riders are limited by what I refer to as “undercarriage” discomfort. Since most of your body weight rests on your saddle, it’s imperative that your undercarriage is happy.

As a theme, this article series is aimed at supporting every rider’s comfort by offering information, suggestions, and topics that spark further discussion with friends, family, healthcare providers, cycling companions, and bike shop employees, to name a few. The tissues that make contact with a bike saddle are often a hot topic among cyclists. Also, we are talking about anatomy and not gender, but even that comes with caveats. For intersex cyclists, you know your bodies best, so consider which information below looks most helpful for you. Most of this is universal, such as sit bones and cleanliness, but ultimately, it’s important to try various styles of saddles and, as is true for everyone, pay attention to what works for you, regardless of how a product is marketed. We all have more in common than you may think.

Please reference the diagram above. This image will help us have a common language of anatomy and saddle terminology.

ANATOMY OF THE UNDERCARRIAGE

Everyone has a bony pelvis, which is essentially a bowl that holds your organs and serves as an anchor for muscle attachments. There are two prominent bones, right and left, that you feel most easily when sitting on a hard surface like a bench seat or a firm saddle. These bony prominences — your “sit bones” — are called your ischial tuberosities and are generally able to tolerate more pressure than other structures. The pelvic floor muscles line the bottom of the pelvic bowl and have many important roles. Depending on the rider, a person either has two or three openings in their pelvic floor muscles for their rectum, vagina, and urethra.

One structure that can’t be seen from the outside is the pudendal nerve. This nerve is formed from the sacral plexus, not the sciatic nerve, and travels in the soft tissue between the bony pelvis and a sitting surface, and supplies sensation to external genitalia and the skin around the anus, anal canal, and perineum. If a person experiences compression or irritation of the pudendal nerve, they might feel other things, such as pain, burning sensations, sexual difficulties like erectile dysfunction, or vulvodynia — pain around the vaginal opening.

SADDLE DESIGN

Many saddles have a cut-out in the middle to provide relief for a rider’s soft tissues, including the pudendal nerve. Saddles are made of different materials that range from super stiff to super soft. Most saddles have multidirectional flex to allow for more natural pelvic motions to occur. Thick foam saddles are generally meant to be used without a chamois whereas thin, more aggressive saddles are often designed to be used in conjunction with a chamois.

One often overlooked factor is saddle width. Our bodies are unique, and some riders have wider bone structure than others. It’s nearly impossible to predict what will work best, so some trial and error is needed.

SADDLE POSITIONING

To determine your best saddle position, start with your saddle parallel to the ground. To do this, place a hardcover book atop the saddle and then place a level on top (assuming your bike is on a level plane). From there, go for a ride long enough to determine whether that position is comfortable for you. Interestingly, many riders experience anterior (frontal) undercarriage discomfort and then tilt the nose of the saddle down toward the ground to relieve the anterior pressure. This often results in feelings of more pressure, because as the nose tips down, the pelvic bowl rolls forward even more. You want your pressure to be well distributed along your undercarriage with most of the pressure on your ischial tuberosities (your sit bones). So sometimes, tilting your saddle up a couple of degrees might actually decrease anterior discomfort. Small changes can make significant improvements.

SADDLE SORES

What to do with the hair down there?

Generally, a person’s pubic hair does not irritate their skin when left alone. Some people choose to manicure their pubic hair, and that can be where skin irritation begins. Microscopic nicks in the skin can allow for local infection. To avoid saddle sores, I recommend the following:

1. Change out of your chamois promptly after riding.
2. Wash your undercarriage promptly after a ride.
3. Experiment with chamois creams, if needed. The creams can prevent chaffing, and some creams have antimicrobial properties.
4. Wash your chamois between rides and allow to dry completely.

As always, there are exceptions to every rule. I can’t stress enough that not every saddle will fit everyone. Saddle selection and chamois choice are deeply personal. I encourage you to seek solutions, advocate for yourself, try different options, and talk about the things that make you uncomfortable. Often, there is a solution out there. Shout-out to the recumbent riders out there. They often have comfortable sitting surfaces that might be a way for riders to stay in the world of cycling.

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