

BRAIN HEALTH BOOST



Cycling Keeps the Brain Rolling Right Along

*The Brain Health Initiative (BHI) is working to develop brain healthy communities, creating a culture that promotes brain health protective factors and decreases risk factors, thereby improving brain health, optimizing brain performance, and preventing and fighting brain illness across the lifespan for the Florida Suncoast region and beyond. **While the general health benefits of cycling are well known, today we look at the rewards specific to brain health.***

They say you never forget how to ride a bike. Science would say that's because the steps of riding a bike is a procedural process, easy for the brain to maintain in its long-term memory bank alongside similar physical tasks. Or maybe the brain simply knows what's good for it.

And make no mistake: Cycling is great for the brain. The quadriceps muscles, which form the upper thighs, and the heart get all the attention when it comes time to pedal, but the brain also thrives on cycling for several reasons. Consider:

- The brain grows stronger the same way our muscles do during vigorous workouts. Cardiovascular activity causes the production of additional capillaries in the brain, which brings more oxygen and nutrients and helps boost performance.
- Cycling increases the production of serotonin and dopamine, the feel-good chemicals, in the brain, improving mood, reducing anxiety, and allowing us to better handle stress.
- The cerebral cortex and motor regions in the central nervous system also are activated by cycling, which improves motor learning and balance.
- As we've established in past Brain **BOOSTS**, what benefits the heart is good for the brain as well. Aerobic activity like cycling has been shown to improve heart health and lower blood pressure. High blood pressure is a common cause of brain illness and dementia.
- Cycling in the natural environment is a brain reward unto itself. Time in nature has been linked to reduced risk of brain illness, including anxiety and depression and boosting one's immune system, among other benefits.

In general, cycling has advantages over other forms of exercise. It is a low-impact activity, which makes it desirable for those who are older, overweight, or have weak or damaged joints. Cycling also is affordable and easy to learn and can serve as an environmentally friendly mode

of transportation.

Of course, safety is a concern for those who ride bicycles near motor vehicles. A [Harvard Health report](#) says between 700 and 800 Americans are killed annually in bicycle crashes, and another 40,000 people are injured. But cyclists can reduce the risk by learning and obeying traffic laws and always wearing a helmet (see more safety tips below).

Another [Harvard Health report](#) indicates the benefits of cycling make it worth going the extra mile to stay safe. University of Glasgow researchers followed more than 263,000 commuters in England, Scotland, and Wales for an average of five years. The participants were divided into five groups based on how they traveled to work on a typical day (walking, cycling, riding in a car or public transportation, a mix of walking and riding, and a mix of cycling and riding). The study found that bike commuters had a lower risk of being diagnosed with cardiovascular disease or cancer, or dying of any cause, during the five-year period, when compared to those who rode to work.

“The benefits of regular physical activity are well documented, but there have been concerns that traffic crashes may negate the benefits from commuting by bicycle,” said Dr. Walter Willett, professor of epidemiology and nutrition at Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health, and a bicycle commuter. “This study is important because it confirms, with a much larger sample size, previous findings from other countries. Moreover, it shows that the benefits strongly outweigh the risks.”

WHAT YOU CAN DO TODAY TO PROTECT YOUR BRAIN HEALTH

Safety is extremely important when it comes to cycling. The BHI offers several ways to maximize safety and make cycling less stressful:

- **FIRST, CONSULT A PHYSICIAN.** Those with certain medical conditions have legitimate concerns about fitness or accidents. Let a doctor make the call. It’s possible indoor cycling may be a better option.
- **ALWAYS WEAR A HELMET.** Research indicates wearing a helmet reduces severe head injury risk in a crash by about 50 percent.
- **PUT ON BIKING ATTIRE.** Bright colors and reflective material make cyclists more visible to drivers. The fabric also controls moisture and can prevent chafing.
- **FIND THE RIGHT BIKE.** Visit a bicycle shop to get advice on picking out a bike that puts the least amount of stress on the body.
- **GET IN POSITION.** Make sure the saddle is set at a position where you feel comfortable and your legs have plenty of room to push the pedals.
- **DODGE POLLUTION.** Choose biking routes that avoid rush hour traffic or any manufacturing or construction pollution.
- **EXPLORE THE TRAILS.** See the beautiful sites of the Suncoast on bike trails such as the Legacy Trail in Sarasota or Robinson Preserve in Bradenton.

BE BRAIN HEALTHY and adopt a lifestyle that includes thoughts, behaviors, emotions, responses, and language that promote brain health protective factors:

- Stress resilience
- Nutrition
- Physical activity
- Sleep
- Social connection
- Emotional wellbeing
- Meaning and Purpose
- Cognitive stimulation and creativity
- Engaging with nature
- General health
- Positive impacts

About the Brain Health Initiative (www.brainhealthinitiative.org)

The Brain Health Initiative (BHI), a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, uses a cutting-edge approach to protecting brain health, promoting brain performance, and preventing and fighting brain illness across the lifespan. The BHI is building brain healthy communities, cultures that foster brain health protective factors and address risk factors, thereby improving brain health and optimizing brain performance outcomes for the Florida Suncoast region and beyond. Join the **Be Brain Healthy** movement, *because brain health matters, and lifestyle makes a difference*. To view all Brain Health Boosts [click here](#).