

Signs it's Time to Replace Your Cycling Gear

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By Molly Hurford



For newer cyclists or those who rarely do their own bike maintenance, it can be confusing to know when certain parts of your bike or your cycling gear need to be replaced. Maybe you're holding out on replacing tires or a pair of bike shorts to save a few bucks, or maybe you're just not sure if they're truly worn out. Here are some signs of wear and tear that suggest it's time to replace your gear, from a performance, comfort and safety perspective. Fortunately, most of the pieces that you'll replace on your bike are relatively inexpensive, and can add years to the life of your bike, increase your comfort exponentially, and make your bike feel and look good as new.

Tires

Most of the time, your tires will let you know they're ready to be replaced. Typically, tires will last for between 1600 kilometers and 4600 kilometers, depending on the type of tire and rubber compound it's made with. For most tires, a puncture or tear that leaves a hole is usually the obvious reason to replace it. The same is true of a tire that's gotten a few flats over a short span of a few rides. But on mountain bikes, the wear on your tire's tread is usually a good indicator of when you need to replace your tires. The knobs will start to look worn down, and you may notice that you're struggling to corner smoothly. The same is true of gravel or cyclocross tires. On road tires, if you can see any wire poking out through the rubber, that's a definite sign! And on bikes that haven't seen the light of day for years (those old cruisers you have stored in your shed, your dad's bike that he last rode in 1986), the tires may look like they're in good shape, but the rubber has likely deteriorated with age.

Saddle

You may think a saddle will last for years—and in some cases, that's true. But some saddles will degrade over time and become progressively less comfortable. You may notice that the seams in the fabric on the saddle are starting to fray. This may not be a big deal at first, but if there are any threads scratching or chafing in awkward spots, it's time to replace your saddle. The rails themselves can wear out as well: If you've made sure that your saddle is firmly attached to your seatpost and the bolts are all tightened properly, yet it's still creaking and feeling wobbly, it's time to get a new saddle. (Depending on your riding style as well as the type of saddle you have, saddles can wear out quickly or be in working condition for years. Bumpy rides and a lot of pressure on the saddle will cause more wear than only riding on smooth surfaces for short durations.) And it's worth noting that if a saddle is uncomfortable and causing chafing or numbness on every ride, even if it's only been used for a couple of months, it's worth replacing it!

Handlebar Tape/Grips

Handlebar tape may seem inconsequential, but it softens the vibrations of your handlebars, making your ride feel much smoother. If your handlebar tape is threadbare and starting to fray, it's time to replace it. Frayed tape doesn't just look bad, it usually is a sign that the foam or padding in the tape has deteriorated as well, which can lead to hand numbness or pain when out for long rides. Similarly, mountain bike grips will also wear down over time and the foam or rubber will start to wear away. If you have textured grips, they should be replaced once the texture begins to wear down, or if they become less grippy and feel more slippery. Luckily, both handlebar tape and grips are fairly inexpensive to replace—typically between \$15 and \$40—and can be a do-it-yourself project.

Cables

There's a reason that most shops offer some type of seasonal or annual maintenance package that includes cable replacement. Over time, cables (the things that make your brakes and shifters work) will stretch, making shifting or braking less effective. And if left too long, they can even snap. If you ride in muddy conditions often, you may need even more frequent replacements, while if you only commute a few miles in good weather most of the time, you may go years without needing a replacement. If you start noticing your braking or shifting isn't as efficient as it used to be, and tightening the cable tension doesn't help, it might be time to get them replaced. (If possible, try to get your bike in for tune ups like this at a bike shop during the offseason: They can often use the extra business, you won't be without your bike during good riding weather, and often they can do the job faster.)

Chain

Before you replace your chain because it's squeaking or creaking, give it a bit of TLC: Degrease it and clean it thoroughly, then apply chain lube and give it a wipe down. See if that helps: Often, riders will go far too long without taking care of their chain, but regular maintenance—degreasing and reapplying lube every few rides—goes a long way. But in the case of a truly worn out chain, while some people may suggest using a chain measuring tool to check to see if your chain requires replacing, most recreational riders don't have that tool in stock. Generally speaking, if you notice that you're suddenly struggling to switch gears, or your chain is getting jammed up or stuck and cleaning it isn't helping the situation, it's time to make the swap.

Cleats

If you're riding clipless pedals, you may be wondering when the cleats on your bike shoes need to be replaced. Generally, you're looking for physical signs of wear and tear—usually pretty obvious on plastic road cleats—or signs that they're no longer functioning properly. If you're struggling to clip in or out, or you find that your shoe is coming unclipped constantly, those are signs you may need new cleats. Typically, cleats can be expected to last between 5,000 and 8,000 kilometers. However, if you often walk in your bike shoes or you clip in and out very frequently, you may need to replace them more often. Loose cleats that cause your foot to move around in the pedal aren't just annoying, they can also cause some knee issues, so don't wait for them to fall off to replace them! (Pedals last much longer than cleats, though if you're experiencing issues clipping in and out even after replacing cleats or they're not spinning freely, you may want to get a new pair, or take them to a shop to get the bearings looked at.)

Bike Shorts

If you're noticing that you're suddenly getting chafe marks or saddle sores but never have in these shorts in the past, and you haven't recently changed weights or had an injury that would impact your pedal stroke, it might be time to change your bike shorts. Unfortunately, over time, chamois lose some of their foam's bounce-back, and if seams start to unravel, you could end up with awkward chafing in spots. A good pair of shorts should last multiple seasons, though, so if your shorts are already falling apart after only a year, it's time to invest in a higher-quality pair.

Helmet

Give your helmet regular check-overs, looking for any damage to the shell or straps. If you have a crash and hit your head while wearing your helmet, that's another reason to replace it. Even if it isn't scuffed or broken, the inner foam might be compromised. Generally, experts suggest that helmets should be replaced every five years regardless of if you've crashed and hit your head—between accidental drops, time spent in a hot car or under the beating sun, and wear-and-tear, this is one place where it's worth displaying an abundance of caution. However, wearing an old helmet is certainly better than wearing no helmet!

Sunglasses

If you've cleaned the lenses over and over and they still fog or still appear scuffed, don't just squint and bear it. Swap them out for new lenses or a new pair of sunglasses. It may cost you a bit, but the ability to see clearly on a ride is priceless.

Sunscreen

OK, this isn't technically bike gear but if you've had it for more than three years or it's past its expiration date, it's time to replace it. After three years, sunscreen can lose efficacy, meaning it won't be as protective—and for \$10 for a bottle of sunscreen, this is a cheap, simple thing to replace... yet it's also one of the most critically important for skin health for cyclists!

About the Author

Molly Hurford is a journalist in love with all things cycling, running, nutrition and movement-related. When not outside, she's writing about being outside and healthy habits of athletes and interviewing world-class athletes and scientists for The Consummate Athlete podcast and website, and most recently launched the book 'Becoming A Consummate Athlete.' She's the author of multiple books including the Shred Girls, a young adult fiction series and online community focused on getting girls excited about bikes. Molly is a little obsessed with getting people psyched on adventure and being outside, and she regularly hosts talks and runs clinics for cyclists and teaches yoga online and IRL... And in her spare time, the former Ironman triathlete now spends time tackling long runs and rides on trails or can be found out hiking with her mini-dachshund DW and husband, cycling coach and kinesiologist Peter Glassford.