

CYCLING: A Prescription

By Steven Jonas, MD, MPH

I have been a cyclist for close to 30 years, primarily as a triathlete, and have been working professionally in the field of preventive medicine for over 40 years, and for the bulk of that time, one of my principal avocations has been directly connected with my vocation. My work's focus has been on the promotion of regular exercise, weight management and the centrality of the mobilization of motivation linking to success in making personal behavior changes. Recently I have been able to contribute my work and passion for exercise with the American College of Sports Medicine (ACSM) on their new national program Exercise is Medicine – whose mission is to make physical activity and exercise a standard part of a disease prevention and treatment medical paradigm in the United States.

But, exercise is medicine, you might ask? We cyclists exercise, and we don't regard it as medicine (at least I hope that not too many of us do). However, in the context of our ever-more sedentary society, the ACSM's philosophy of Exercise is Medicine is aimed at getting Americans off the couch. In that sense, cycling can be "medicine." So how do we get Americans moving and commuting by bike or foot rather than by car? By targeting health professions.

The vision of the ACSM's program is for physical activity to be considered by all health care providers as a
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for Better Health



NEW YORK CITY

The New York City Department of Health (NYC DOH) recently released a report that shows that people who walk and bike daily are more likely to self-report good health. According to the report, 83 percent of adult New Yorkers who regularly walk or bike for transportation report excellent, very good or good health. Furthermore, the connection between improved health and frequent biking and walking is significant amongst New Yorkers, regardless of income level. Biking and walking is a prescription that all New Yorkers can afford. The DOH report would like even more of NYC's citizens to use active transportation, and concluded that better infrastructure for walking and biking is needed for a healthier city. To learn more visit www.nyc.gov/html/doh/downloads/pdf/survey/survey-2009commuting.pdf or www.nyc.gov/html/doh/html/pr2009/pr077-09.shtml.

EXERCISE PRESCRIPTION RESOURCES



Canada: PACE

PACE Canada is a comprehensive guide to counseling for healthy, active living. It is designed to assist health care providers in effectively increasing their patients' physical activity levels and improving their eating habits. The program does not require staff to have special medical training and can be used

effectively by a wide range of primary care providers. www.pace-canada.org



British Columbia: ActNow BC

A health and wellness initiative launched by the British Columbia Provincial Government in March 2005. It is a multi-year initiative involving several ministries, 2010 Legacies Now, the British Columbia Healthy Living Alliance (BCHLA), community organizations, and businesses throughout the province. ActNow BC promotes physical activity, healthy eating, living tobacco free, and making healthy choices during pregnancy. www.actnowbc.ca



New Zealand: Green Prescription

A Green Prescription (GRx) is a health professional's written advice to a patient to be physically active, as part of the patient's health management. It has proven to be a smart and cost-effective way to help people stay healthy. Research published in the *New Zealand Medical Journal* indicates that a Green Prescription is an inexpensive way of increasing activity, and research published in the *British Medical Journal* found that a Green Prescription can improve a patient's quality of life over 12 months, with no evidence of adverse effects. www.moh.govt.nz/greenprescription



Australia: Lifescripts

Lifescrpts is an Australian national initiative, being implemented through local divisions of general practice, promoting risk factor management in general practice and primary health care services.

Lifescrpts' resources aim to make it easier for general practitioners and their practices to manage lifestyle-related risk factors by providing a framework for: raising and discussing lifestyle risk factors with patients, advice in the form of a written script and associated patient education, and referrals to other providers to support healthy lifestyle. www.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/content/health-publth-strateg-lifescrpts-index.htm



United States: Exercise is Medicine

Exercise is Medicine's vision is to make physical activity and exercise a standard part of a disease prevention and treatment medical paradigm in the United States. www.exerciseismedicine.org



vital sign in every patient visit and that patients are effectively counseled and referred as to their physical activity and health needs, thus leading to overall improvement in the public's health and long-term reduction in health care costs. Just think. You could go into your doctor's office; and as well as taking your blood pressure, counting your pulse and respiratory rates, weighing you and such; you would be asked, every time, about your physical activity. You could be prescribed to ride your bike for all your trips that are two miles or less. You could be prescribed to commute by bicycle.

In October 2008, the Department of Health and Human Services came out with the 2008 Physical Activity Guidelines for Americans, the first-ever national standards for physical exercise. The report includes standards for children, adults and older adults and states that "adults who are physically active are healthier and less likely to develop many chronic diseases than adults who are inactive. They also have better fitness, including a healthier body size and composition."

The guidelines are very useful for both health care professionals and the general public for determining what one needs to do to achieve that, in terms of health and fitness.

The recommended minimum level for an average adult's health status improvement has been set at 150 minutes per week of moderate intensity exercise. Adults gain additional and more extensive health and fitness benefits with even more physical activity. What Exercise is Medicine says is that for that health-promoting intervention/activity, a health professional should write a prescription for exercise similar to a prescription for a medication.

There are two approaches that health professional could use to prescribe exercising regularly to patients who are not presently exercising. First is the lifestyle exercise approach, building bouts of exercise into one's pattern of daily living – like bike commuting instead of driving, using the stairs instead of the elevator, walking to the store, and getting off public transport one stop early. The other is what many cyclists do already, dubbed as the scheduled leisure time approach – working out on a regular, scheduled basis.

Unfortunately, many primary care providers, chiropractors or even some physical therapists and athletic trainers struggle with helping people to become regular exercisers. Exercise is Medicine is designed to educate and train clinicians of all kinds in how to effectively provide the exercise prescription in clinical practice. And what easier and fun way then to suggest bike riding? Recreational bike riding is a safe, low-impact,



aerobic activity for Americans of all ages. A 150-pound cyclist burns 410 calories while pedaling 12 miles in an hour – almost the equivalent calories of a McDonald's Quarter Pounder®. A 200-pound cyclist burns 546 calories while going 12 miles per hour – almost the equivalent of a Big Mac®.

The next question might be, why exercise regularly, anyway? Regular exercise reduces your risk of getting a variety of diseases and negative health conditions, such heart disease, diabetes, certain forms of cancer, obesity, high blood pressure and osteoporosis. It helps in the amelioration and management of a similar list. It helps you to get in shape. It helps in weight management. But as most regular exercisers know, for us the most important reasons to exercise regularly are that it makes us feel better, and look better, first to ourselves and then to others. And yes, we do it because we have fun doing it (at least some of the time)!

Cyclists, of course, come in a wide variety of shapes and sizes, enjoy different types of cycling and bike for many different reasons. But we are all exercisers at one level or another. We all show the flag for personal health promotion.

Additionally, many cyclists do multi-sport training, whether we participate in multi-sport racing or not. Multi-sport training is considered to be the ideal way to work out on a schedule over a long period of time. With cycling, plus running, and/or swimming, and/or weight-training, and/or a variety of other distance/strength-training activities that some of us do, we know

"Adults who are physically active are healthier and less likely to develop many chronic diseases than adults who are inactive. They also have better fitness, including a healthier body size and composition."

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NAME _____ DOCTOR, MD

ADDRESS _____

R (Please Print) _____ DATE _____

Take 2 laps around the neighborhood and call me in the morning.

LABEL _____

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HAND NAME DISPENSING _____

INITIAL BOX _____

that we achieve balance among the muscle groups we use, reduce our risk of injury from overuse in any one of the sports, and reduce our chances of quitting because of the boredom that can arise from doing just one sport.

With winter, and the cold weather that accompanies it, bearing down on many of us, we can celebrate cycling as a form of transportation or exercise that you can do year-round, if so inclined. Taking proper account of road conditions, some of us will ride outdoors all winter. I used to do cold-weather riding, and to keep warm I would actually wear my ski helmet rather than my bike helmet. But at 72, I must admit, I don't do that anymore. But we can ride indoors on exercycles (I've got one that actually mimics a triathlon bike), on resistance trainers and on rollers. Yes indeed, cycling is a sport for all seasons.

Finally, cyclists in general, and members of the League of American Bicyclists in particular, can play an important role in making their own health care practitioners aware that Exercise is Medicine, in the context of the importance of regular exercise. Urge your doctors to get involved and encourage cycling. If you happen to be a health care practitioner yourself, you are in a prime position to become a mover in this new campaign to promote regular exercise through the direct intervention of health professions. As a health professional, one does not have to be a regular exerciser in order to promote exercising regularly, but it sure helps. Those of us who walk the walk, ahem ... bike the bike, are that much more effective in talking the talk.

Bicycling on a regular basis is growing in our nation. There is an increasing amount of political support for our activity, as exercise and as a transportation alternative. Indeed, we cyclists are poised not only to fuel healthy lifestyle choices for ourselves, but also by example for our nation. ●



This article is based in part on Jonas' column "Exercise is Medicine" which appeared in "Ordinary Mortals; Talking Triathlon with Steve Jonas," Summer, 2009 issue of *USA-Triathlon Life*, Vol. 12, Issue 3.



To learn more read *Exercise is Medicine: A Clinician's Guide to Exercise Prescription*.

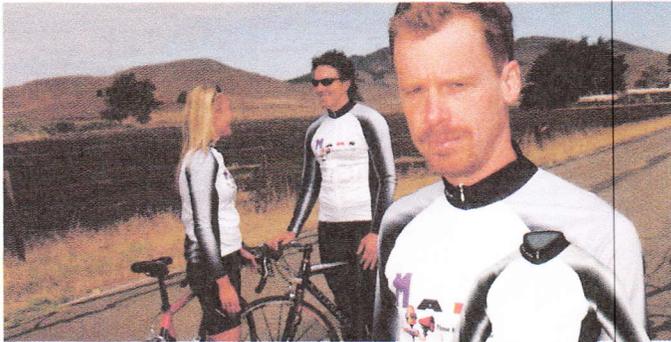


Sources: *Exercise and Your Heart — A Guide to Physical Activity*. National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute / American Heart Association, DHHS, PHS, NIH Publication No. 93-1677 and McDonald's.

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