

Saddle Safety

Ergonomic bicycle seats take the pressure and pain out of long rides on the road

By COELI CARR

MATTHEW SCHMIDT BOUGHT his first mountain bike 10 years ago, and from the onset his recreational rides in the idyllic Mount Tamalpais area of California's Marin County left him numb in his personal undercarriage, where the crotch meets the bicycle saddle. Schmidt, 42, of San Rafael, Calif., dismissed the discomfort as the price to pay for vigorous riding on rough terrain. But by the end of 2002, the perineal pain and sexual problems he had experienced for years became intense. He stopped riding and, desperate for answers, saw several urologists before the last finally diagnosed pudendal-nerve damage, caused by his leaning into the protruding nose of his bicycle seat.

Given the attention that Lance Armstrong has brought to bicycle riding and its positive reputation as a good cardio workout, it's no surprise that the sport is high on the list of today's exercise options. But health experts say anyone considering this fitness and recreational pursuit needs to be aware that the way most bike seats are built can put harmful pressure on sensitive parts of the body.

"Every day I'll see two or three people, men and women, with bicycle-related sexual problems" says Boston urologist Irwin Goldstein. "It's not a rare occurrence." In a study conducted in 2000, the National Institute for Occupational Safety and Health found that male police officers in Long Beach, Calif., who spent many hours riding while working in a bicycle unit, showed a decrease in the quality of their nocturnal erections. And in September 2005, Goldstein, who is also editor in chief of *The Journal of Sexual Medicine*, published similar results from a study he had conducted. The subjects, men in their 30s and 40s, experienced no blood flow to the penis as soon as they straddled the protruding portion of a bike saddle. "What you're worried about is that the pressure will cause what we call endothelial injury, which is a harbinger of the beginning of localized atherosclerosis," says Goldstein. "Over time, that can develop into permanent impotence."

But bike lovers don't have to abandon cycling altogether. Instead, Goldstein suggests they choose a bike with a noseless seat that allows riders to bear their weight on their sit bones, just as they do when sitting straight on a chair. Goldstein concedes that the nose helps racing cyclists steer and navigate turns more easily and that some may fear looking "wussy" with a wider seat. But, he says, riders have to weigh health risks against speed or style. Genitalia-friendly seats have been commercially available for years. Since 1983, Hobson Associates, based in the Los Angeles suburb of Reseda, has sold more than half a million of its noseless Easyseats, which feature a split seat that reduces pressure on the crotch and retail for about \$30. The company has two new models set to debut this summer.

Matthew Schmidt says that had he—or his urologists—known about this type of seat early on, "it would have been a no-brainer. I'd have bought one immediately." Now he advises friends to consider nontraditional seats. And, he says, because erectile dysfunction is becoming better recognized as a liability of bicycle riding, "the vast majority of men listen raptly to what I'm saying."



NO NOSE Hobson's Pro-Hub X2 (\$90) has gel-filled seat pads for distance training.