

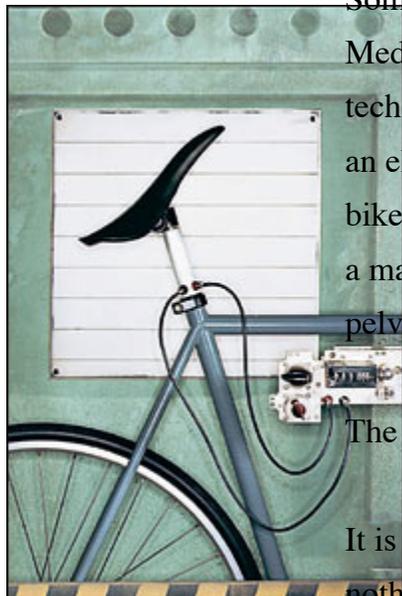


You May Be Seated

A new test for bike saddles promises to protect you from getting numb or falling limp. Go nuts!

By: Roy Furchgott (/1742406/roy-furchgott) Sep 1, 2004

Bicycle Seats



I'M STANDING IN THE COOL, eerily quiet laboratory of Frank Sommer, a professor of urology at Germany's University of Cologne Medical Center. I've dropped my bike shorts around my knees so that a lab tech can swab my penis with cleanser. Why? Because he's going to attach an electrode, and he needs a clean surface. I'm here to try out Sommer's bike-seat test, the first in the world that measures blood circulation through a man's penile arteries—the major blood pathways that run out of the pelvis and to the penis—while he's riding a bicycle.

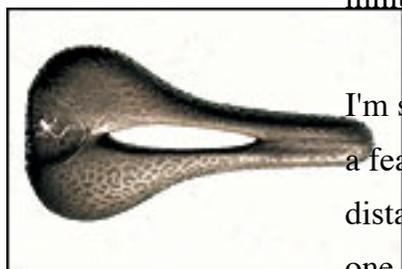
The technician fumbles with my privates like it's no big deal.

It is to me. As I do during a hernia check, I gaze straight ahead as if nothing were happening. The lab guy glues a plastic collar to the tip of my

appendage and secures it with surgical tape. Now comes the electrode, which screws into the collar and registers the blood-oxygen concentration inside my penis by measuring the release of oxygen on the skin's surface.

Once I'm properly wired, I pull up my shorts, hop onto a stationary bike, and start pedaling like a bewildered test monkey for the next several minutes.

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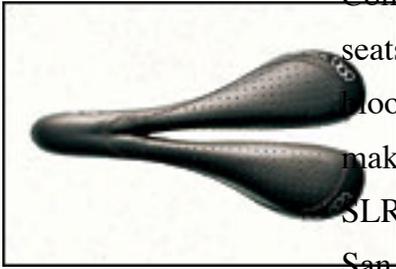


I'm suffering this indignity in the name of science. For several years now, a fear has haunted men, and it goes like this: Riding a bike for long distances can bring permanent impotence. As fears go, it's an effective one, but it's based on the unproven theory that the restriction of blood flow

caused by bike seats results in impotence. Sommer is focusing on the first part of this assumption, and if it turns out that bike seats are a problem, his work will be invaluable in helping produce the best possible seat designs.

For their part, bike manufacturers long ago started creating seats in

Bicycle Seats



response to this perceived malady. Since 1998, Specialized Bicycle Components, of Morgan Hill, California, has sold more than 1.5 million seats featuring a wedge carved out of the rear, a design meant to maintain blood flow through the penile arteries. Their success drove other seat makers to develop their own versions. Some products, like the Selle Italia SLR, place an elongated hole in the middle, while others, like the Selle San Marco Racelite Gel, employ strategically placed gel cushions.

(http://www.outsideonline.com/sites/default/files/migrated-images/1292064-4-2_bodywork3.jpg)

"Originally, the industry thought these saddles were going to be a fad that would soon disappear," says Dr. Roger Minkow, an ergonomic consultant from Petaluma, California, who develops saddles for Specialized. Five years later, the fad continues to affect nearly every saddle's design.

Bicycle Seats



THE GREAT ERGONOMIC freakout dates back to 1997, when *Bicycling* magazine's Ed Pavelka claimed that his 14,000-mile-a-year riding regimen had left him temporarily impotent. Pavelka quoted one of his doctors, urologist Irwin Goldstein, of Boston University, who had said his research indicated that cycling may cause impotence—a.k.a. erectile

(http://www.outsideonline.com/sites/default/files/migrated-images/1292064-4-3_bodywork4.jpg)

dysfunction—"in a very small percentage of cases." The story was picked up by the TV newsmagazine *20/20*, and Goldstein became the go-to guy on the subject. Before long his tone sharpened, and he started dispensing quotes like "There are two kinds of cyclists: those who are impotent, and those who will be."

Goldstein's findings had one flaw, his critics charged: They were based on studies that evaluated tiny numbers of cyclists. Even today, the best statistics available come from the Massachusetts Male Aging Study, conducted by the New England Research Institutes, which evaluated 113 cyclists. The study's published results, in 2001, showed that the 90 men who rode less than three hours a week were less apt to experience impotence than similarly active noncyclists. But the study also discovered that the 23 men who rode more than three hours a week were more likely to have impotence problems than the other cyclists. This last result now forms the foundation of Goldstein's stance. "These days, I'm a little more moderate in tone, but I'm not any less convinced. I want men to know that riding involves risk, and let them know what to do about it," he says.

But Martin Resnick, chairman of the Department of Urology at Case Western Reserve University Hospital, in Cleveland, believes that 30 years of research on this question have not yet provided a final answer. "Ask any other urologist about these numbers and he'll probably tell you that nobody

knows for sure if there's a problem," Resnick says.

"There isn't any clear, definitive data yet, just theory," he adds. "Truth is, we simply don't know if sitting on a bike and reducing blood supply to the penis for half an hour, an hour, or two hours is even relevant to erectile dysfunction."

UNTIL DOCTORS SETTLE the question, the attitude among men and seat makers seems to be: Prepare for the worst. The search continues for the Holy Grail of seats, one that won't squash the artery. Today, that quest leads through Sommer's lab in Germany, where ergonomic engineers can come to test their latest ideas by plugging electrodes into riders.

"Finding the perfect seat will erase this controversy," says Minkow, adding, "We're so close."

In the meantime, cyclists who want to play it safe can take advantage of new information uncovered by Sommer. First, buy a saddle built to promote circulation (see "Back in the Saddle Again (http://outside.away.com/outside/bodywork/200409/bicycle_seats_4.html)"), and stay clear of super-plush models. It sounds counterintuitive, but Sommer has found that the cushier the seat, the more you sink into it and, thus, the more you constrict the arteries.

When spinning through a ride, avoid numbness by periodically standing on the pedals and cranking for 30 seconds. "Get up every ten minutes or so," says Minkow. "It'll boost the blood supply to your crotch."

Whatever your fears, there's no reason to stop cycling. Armed with a new saddle and the latest tips, you shouldn't ever go numb on a ride again, much less end up impotent. So saddle up, brother.

The results of German urologist Frank Sommer's tests show that the perfect saddle for thwarting penile numbness has yet to be designed. But he did evaluate 19 different seats to find out which ones outshined traditional solid, dome-shaped saddles, which allow anemic 20 percent blood-circulation flows. Sommer's top performers demonstrated blood flows above 70 percent. The best included the **SPECIALIZED BG PRO** (not shown, \$80; 877-808-8154, www.specialized.com) (<http://www.specialized.com>) and these seats:

TERRY PRECISION CYCLING, a women-specific bike company, used its experience designing women's saddles to produce the **FLY Ti** for men. (\$110; 800-289-8379, www.terrybicycles.com) (<http://www.terrybicycles.com>)

The **SELLE ITALIA SLK GEL FLOW** splits the saddle in half to ease pressure on the internal pudendal artery whether the rider sits forward or back on the seat. (\$135; 800-279-3793,

In September, **SPECIALIZED** will introduce the latest creation based on testing in Sommer's lab, the **ALIAS**, which improved blood flow over traditional saddles by 400 percent. (\$85)

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