

Frequent cycling: Reduced sexual sensation for women? ^[1]

Dear Alice,

I have started spinning and I absolutely love it. Currently doing it about 3 times per week. My boyfriend says that spinning will cause permanent damage to my female genitalia, such as damaging the nerves, leading to reduced sensitivity and ultimately impeding my enjoyment of sex. I always wear the appropriate padded shorts. Is this true or not?

Answer

Dear Reader,

Spinning ^[2], also known as indoor or stationary biking, is a great way to fit some low-impact, high-intensity cardio into your week. It's great that you're staying physically active, and it sounds like you're really revved up about this new workout routine! Your boyfriend isn't just spinning your wheels though — his concerns aren't completely unfounded. While research into the long-term effects of cycling on female anatomy is very limited, some studies on competitive cyclists have found that frequent and prolonged time on the saddle can lead to a variety of symptoms, including reduced sensitivity. Making modifications such as using padded shorts or adjusting the seat may provide some relief, but the research is inconclusive. The good news is that this doesn't happen to everyone, and if symptoms do occur, they're usually temporary and resolve on their own or with rest.

In addition to the symptoms that your partner might be worried about, people who engage in extended periods of intense cycling have also experienced the following:

- Temporary clitoral ^[3] insensitivity
- Vulvar ^[4] swelling, pain, or discomfort
- Chaffing of the genital region, inner thighs, or groin
- Pain on urination
- Painful penetrative sex
- Difficulty reaching orgasm

It's still unclear how cycling might lead to symptoms like decreased sensation. One hypothesis is that intense biking, which is associated with frequent and prolonged compression from the

bicycle's saddle seat, can cause changes to the nerves and blood flow to the genital region. Another explanation suggests that prolonged training on a bike can interfere with the body's normal lymphatic circulation, and this can lead to vulvar swelling and discomfort.

Reader, you mentioned that you wear padded shorts. Unfortunately, because the research is pretty scant, it's hard to say if padded shorts or specific types of bike seats are really effective at preventing these symptoms. However, if padded shorts add to your overall comfort, it may choose to continue using them, especially if your fitness center doesn't have a lot of options when it comes to adjusting the bikes.

If possible, you may find it helpful to make sure your ride is as ergonomic as possible — that is, adjusting your bike to best fit your unique body can minimize the pressure on your genital region and reduce the chance of injury. For example, you can adjust your bike settings so that the handlebars are at least level with the seat height or higher. This may reduce the amount of forward-tilt in your hip-bones, helping you sit more upright. Many cyclists find this position more comfortable than racing postures that, while more aerodynamic, can put more pressure on the genital area. If you aren't sure how to make these bike adjustments yourself, try asking your cycling instructor for some tips before you get ready to sweat it out at your next session. You may also try to customize your ride — if you're able to, opt for a saddle with the shape, width, and level of cushioning that makes you feel most comfortable and supported while training. Some people have reported reduced discomfort from seats that are wider and short-nosed, rather than longer and narrow-nosed.

As you continue going to spin class, try to pay attention to how you feel once you're off the bike. Do you notice any tingling or numbness that lasts for hours or even days after a session? Is there any unusual swelling of your [labia](#) ^[5]? Is it painful or difficult to pee? If you do start to experience symptoms that persist or are particularly bothersome, you may want to consider making an appointment with a health care provider. They can examine your symptoms as well as give you more advice and address any additional questions or concerns you may have. In the meantime, you could also try taking pit-stops during long rides, switching to a recumbent bike, or adding variety to your workout with some off-bike activities that might give your seat a break.

Lastly, keep in mind that sexual function is complex, and can be impacted by a number of factors other than a new love of spinning — changes to habits such as drinking alcohol, smoking, and how you cope with stress can all affect your level of sexual satisfaction. Staying physically active, mixing up your sexual routine (i.e., trying out lubricants, sex toys, or different positions), and maintaining open communication with your partner about what feels good and what doesn't are all great ways of boosting your sexual enjoyment. For more advice and resources on sexual pleasure and anatomy, check out the related Q&As and others in the *Go Ask Alice!* [Sexual and Reproductive Health](#) ^[6] archives.

Spin on,

Alice!

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