

The Two-Minute Bike Check

Before each day's riding, the American Youth Hostels and some commercial tour groups have the participants run through a quick series of checks to make sure their bicycles are ready to hit the road. It's a great habit to acquire each time you ride, especially if your bike (or your child's) hasn't been ridden for more than a week.

Once you memorize all the steps, the check really does take only about two minutes, as you will be routinely maintaining the bike and the adjustments will be minimal. The check is also a great way to assess the condition of a second-hand bike you are thinking about buying.

Don't ignore a problem you discover. With bicycles, an ounce of prevention is definitely worth a pound of cure. Particularly with wheels, the bottom bracket (where the pedals join the frame), and the headset (where the handlebar joins the frame), an expert five-minute preventive tightening at a shop can eliminate *major* expenses later for repairs.

In the descriptions below, a slash (/) means check first one and then the other, not both at once. For common problems, the remedy follows in parentheses. If you are not able to fix it yourself, take it to a bike shop.

WHEELS AND TIRES.

Make sure both front and rear tires are inflated to the proper pressure. The recommended pressure for any tire is usually embossed on the tire's sidewalls. At proper pressure most tires should feel pretty hard. Until you're experienced, use a bicycle tire pressure gauge rather than your thumb.

Make sure wheels are true—that is, flat and perfectly circular. Lift the front/back end of the bike and spin the wheel. When you sight directly down from the tire to hub, wheel should appear to rotate in exactly one plane. If it seems to wobble, it may be out of true. Check no spokes are loose or broken. (Tighten the appropriate spokes, or take it to a shop to have it trued.)

Check that hub bearings are sound. With the bike resting on the ground, press against the top of the front/back rim perpendicular to the wheel, trying to push the top of the rim to the left or right. There should be no movement or clicks in the hub bearings. (If there is a slight movement, tighten the hub cones with a cone wrench, taking care not to overtighten.)

BRAKES.

Check tension of brake cables. With the bike stationary, squeeze the right/left brake levers as if you were braking hard. When squeezed, a good inch of clearance should separate the lever from the handlebar grip. (If there is less than half an inch, tighten the rear/front brake cable.)

Check that brake pads firmly grip the metal wheel rims. When the left/right brake lever is squeezed, note the position of the pads pressing against the front/rear rim. The pad's entire braking surface should be against the metal rim, not partly on the rubber tire or in the air below the rim. (Adjust the position of the brake pads in the brake arms.)

Check braking action. While moving the bike forward, grip the right/left brake lever hard. The bike should stop securely, with no slipping of brake pads on the rim. (Replace pads that are hard, brittle, cracked, or worn thin.)

QUICK RELEASES.

Check that the handles of wheel quick-release skewers are closed firmly and pointing backwards. "Firm" means the skewer handles should require considerable effort to pull open or push closed. Position the handles to point toward the rear of the bike, so they won't catch twigs and risk opening while you're riding. (If the skewers are too loose, screw in the conical end half a turn and try again until they're secure.)

HANDLEBAR AND HEADSET.

Check that handlebar is secured tightly. Stand in front of the bicycle with the front wheel gripped between your knees. Try to twist the handlebar from side to side while holding the wheel still. It should not move. (If the handlebar is loose, tighten the bolt on top of the handlebar stem.)

Make sure the headset is secure in the head tube. With the front wheel still gripped between the knees, try to lift the handlebar straight up out of the frame. There should be no slight movement or click. (If there is a perceptible click, tighten the headset with a headset wrench, taking care not to overtighten.)

PEDALS AND BOTTOM BRACKET.

Make sure pedals have no internal friction. Spin the pedals on the ends of their crank arms. They should spin freely, unless they designed to stop in certain pre-set positions. (If they resist movement, they may need to be repacked with grease.)

Make sure bottom bracket is tight. Grasp the pedal crank arms with your hands and try to move the cranks in and out perpendicular to the frame of the bike—that is, perpendicular to the plane in which the chainwheels spin. The pedal cranks should not move. (If you sense any slight movement or click in the spindle, tighten the bottom bracket.)

FRONT AND REAR DERAILEURS.

Check that all the attachment nuts and bolts are secure. Check attachments of both front and rear derailleurs.

Make sure that all speeds are accessible without the chain's jumping off either the innermost or outermost gears. Shift the rear derailleur into lowest gear—that is, onto largest cog in the rear. Make sure the derailleur arm does not hit the spokes. Next, turn the pedals and shift through all combinations of front/rear gears. All speeds should be accessible, and the chain should not jump off either into the spokes or onto the axle. (If the chain jumps off, tighten the derailleur stop screws a quarter turn and try it again.)

SADDLE.

Make sure the saddle is firmly anchored. Try to move the seat up and down in the seat tube, rotate it, push its nose up and down, or slide it backwards and forwards on its rails. The saddle should remain firm. (If it moves, tighten the appropriate bolts. If the bolts won't tighten, replace the appropriate parts.)

ACCESSORIES.

Make sure all accessories work and are securely fastened. Check your lights are working and reflectors are securely anchored to the bike. Check that all bungee cords (stretchy shock cords) are tight, no straps are dangling in the spokes, the bags are zipped, screws holding on racks, panniers, or child seat are secure. Check that helmet, gloves, and rear-view mirror are fastened. Last, lift the bike a few inches and drop it. If nothing falls off, you're ready to roll!

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