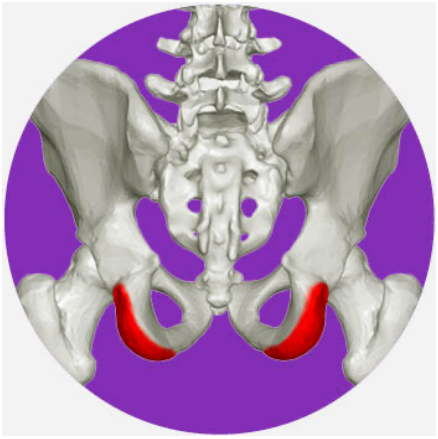
No Need to Get Sore
Over Your Saddle

The saddle is the most important and personal component on your bike. The infamous Spanish professional cyclist Miguel Indurain (Giro Italia twice and Tour de France 5 times) flew with his saddle, in hand, when air transfers were required – that's importance he attributed to his saddle. What works for you may not work for many other people. Selecting a saddle should involve an extensive auditioning process. Most quality bike shops have a saddle lending library for you to test ride several different sizes, shapes, and price points. Oh, and the saddle that came with your bike is usually the cheapest saddle that the manufacturer could find. Narrowing down your choices is what this article is all about – so let's get started.



First-of-all, if you have been having discomfort with your saddle you may want to have a complete bike fit done before jettisoning your current saddle. Proper bike fit ensures that your body weight is distributed properly through your contact points on the bike - bum, hands, and feet. Your anatomy dictates which saddle you finally end up with. The dimension between your "sit bones" (Ischial Tuberosities) is critical. You can have them measured at any bike shop that does bike fits, or you can measure them yourself at home using a piece of corrugated cardboard.

Simply place the cardboard on any hard surface where you can sit down. Sit on the cardboard and bring your knees up to your chest and hold them there by wrapping your arms around your lower legs. It takes a bit balancing, but you should feel that you are now balancing on your sit bones. Now rock side-to-side. This should cause the cardboard to deform under the pressure of your body weight on those sit bones.

Stand up. Now, if you have 2 ball bearings or marbles place them in the collapsed dimples in the cardboard. They will centre in the lowest area of those depressions. Simply measure the dimensions centre-to-centre of the ball bearings or marbles. If you don't have ball bearings or marbles - by feel, find the lowest point in the depressions. Mark those points with an X and measure between the two marks.

Take a measuring tape with you when you're looking at saddles and zero in on saddles that will support your sit-bone width.

Saddle Lasts

Saddles are built in two common shapes – ***Dome Lasted*** (image right) and ***Flat Lasted*** (image next page upper) Of course, there are many variations that fall in between these shapes.

Dome Lasted saddles have quite a gradual roll-off of their sides. They are generally more comfortable for road cyclists where proportionally more weight is carried by the upper body. Their gradual roll-off gives clearance for the road cyclists inner thighs.

Mountain bike riders and casual recreation riders tend to sit more upright and consequently carry more weight on their bums. A dome lasted saddle for them will feel like the saddle is trying to split them in half – not pleasant. That much pressure in the perineum area (The perineum in humans is the space between the anus and scrotum in the male, or frenulum labiorum pudendi in the female) can cause numbness and eventually nerve damage for both men and women.

The Flat Lasted saddle (image – right upper) presents a sort of platform for the sit bones to land on. The sharp roll-off of the sides is one of the defining characteristics of this saddle type. These will generally have more padding and be more comfortable for Mountain Bike riders and casual recreation riders. For road riders though, that sharp cut-off at the sides can cause irritation of the Adductor Magnus/Adductor Longus (upper inner thighs) along with their associated tendons.

In between these two saddles, you will find saddles that attempt to strike a balance by providing that flat platform with sides that flex to provide clearance for the road cyclist's inner thighs. One such saddle Is the Fi·zi:k Arion (image middle right/lower right. The cut-outs along the sides of the saddle allow the saddle shell to flex with the rider's movements.

Side Profiles

Saddles also vary in their shape from the nose of the saddle to the back of the saddle. These side profiles seek to accomplish specific performance gains.

Hammock Profile saddles drop down from the nose of the saddle and then rise again towards the back. Some cyclists prefer this design because it tends to lock the hips in place (image 4th from top). Lance Armstrong actually drilled his saddle shells to create this type of profile.

Backstop Profile saddles are level from the nose of the saddle and then rise towards the back of the saddle (image next page - top). This profile allows a rider to push against the higher tail especially when time trialing or climbing.

Pressure Relief

Not everyone needs special saddles that provide pressure relief in the perineum. In general people who have limited mobility in the lower back in combination with tight hamstrings and gluteal muscles tend to put more pressure on the perinium region. These riders will have quite a pronounced curvature in their backs as they attempt to reach forward to their handlebars. Riders with good flexibility reach to their handlebars by pivoting from the hips without applying excessive pressure on the perinium.

Cut-outs offer the best way of both lightening the saddle and providing pressure relief. Some manufacturers like SMP go as far as splitting the saddle entirely (image 2 next page).

Gel Inserts (image 3rd from top) offer another way of limiting the pressure on the perinium by using a padded insert that seeks to mimic human flesh. These are less effective since they merely distribute pressure over a wider area.

Other Considerations

Saddle Level. A bike fitter will always start a rider out with the saddle dead level. Minor adjustments away from dead level are permitted but avoid dropping the nose of the saddle too far. A dropped saddle nose will often result in the rider constantly riding forward and then having to push back onto the saddle – which gets old real fast

Saddle Pads/Thicker Saddle Padding These are often found on the bikes of very casual riders. These suffer the same fate as gel insert saddles.
The pressure is still there – it's just spread over a wider area.
Quite often the numbness and pain still occur – it just takes a little longer.
Think about this – how many professional cyclists have super cushy saddles on their bike? The answer is zero, and they put 30 to 40 thousand kilometres per year on their bikes.

Suspension Seat Posts like the infamous ***Thud Buster*** from ***Cane Creek Cycling*** certainly take a lot of the road vibration and moderate bumps out of the equation but don't really relieve any pressure.

Cycling Shorts Chamois. For the new cyclist the tendency is to go for softer, thicker padding, but what is really needed is a firm chamois to better support the rider's sit-bones. Thicker pads often result in chaffing, infected hair follicles and ultimately saddle sores.

Finally, if you do decide to change saddles keep in mind that most synthetic saddles don't really change shape very much over their lifetime.

Brooks saddles are different, as many of them are leather and will, over time, change shape to conform to one's derriere. In some models they also have an adjustment to alter the curvature of the saddle profile. **In all cases you will need to give any new saddle at least 10 hours of saddle-time as your bum gets used to the shape of a new saddle. Don't expect that "ah hah" moment where it's love at first try. We're adapting a very imperfect human tush to a very symmetrical unyielding machine – give it time.**