

Bicycle Commuting:

Thousands do it, you can too!

by Arthur Ross, Bicycle Federation of Wisconsin Board member and Madison's Bicycle and Pedestrian Coordinator

The bicycle is the vehicle of choice for thousands of Wisconsin workers and students.

The bicycle is an excellent choice for commuting, providing personal travel at the times and to destinations desired.

If you live within five miles of work or school, a bicycle is often the quickest and most efficient mode of travel.

Many bicyclists commute longer distances as well. Commuting to school or work by bicycle can become an enjoyable part of your daily routine.

Many cities in the state encourage the use of bicycles for transportation, and provides accommodations for bicyclists on many roads, like striped bike lanes. Some streets are signed as bike routes. These streets do not necessarily have special accommodations for bicyclists, but rather are recommended routes.

Why not plan on trying bicycle commuting a few times and see if it fits your needs? A little planning ahead with the help of this guide will make bicycle commuting more enjoyable.

Once you establish a routine, bicycle commuting becomes second nature. And it gets easier the more you do it.

Why Bike to Work?

Improve Health and Fitness. Like any form of regular, aerobic exercise, bicycling improves personal fitness, enhances energy levels, reduces stress, and stimulates the immune system. Bicycle commuting is a great way to build regular exercise into a busy, but often sedentary, work routine. Bicycling is a moderate, low impact exercise which can be continued throughout life.

Save Money. Add up what you spend driving to work every day. Bicycle commuting saves you parking fees, fuel costs, and maintenance costs. Don't forget that the largest costs of automobile ownership are paid up front: insurance and car payments. Insurance premiums usually are lower when you do not use your car for commuting to work. You might be able to save as much as 25 percent of your income if you can replace a second car with a bicycle. A new bicycle would pay for itself in a few months.

Avoid Congestion. Ever find yourself sitting in traffic, wishing you were somewhere else? On a bicycle, you can travel on secondary roads and paths, often arriving in less time than if you'd driven through rush-hour traffic! And you can usually park your bicycle quickly and close to your destination.

Save the Environment. Autos are the single largest source of U.S. air pollution. Short trips - those that are most bikeable - are up to three times more polluting per mile than long trips. An average four-mile round-trip bike commute prevents nearly 15 pounds of auto air pollution from contaminating your air. When it substitutes for shorter auto trips, the bicycle eliminates 3.6 pounds of auto pollutants per mile. And since the bicycle season matches the ground-level ozone season, by biking instead of driving, you contribute to pollution prevention when it is most needed.

Help your Community. Bicyclists should be taxed less. If the real taxpayer subsidy of autos were reflected in fuel taxes, a gallon of gasoline might cost as much as \$9.00. That's because our other taxes cover the costs of road building, maintenance, parking space, police services and losses from crashes, pollution and congestion. If more commuters bicycled, these costs would go down; all taxpayers (businesses and private citizens) would save money.

Getting Started with Biking to Work

Here are a few general tips to get you started:

Check out your bike and yourself, especially if you haven't bicycled in a while. Take it slow at first if you're not used to moderate exercise. Look over your bike for loose or broken parts, and make sure there's enough air in the tires.

Take a few shakedown rides to get used to your bike and riding in traffic. Do this at a time when you are not in a hurry so you can stop if you need to, or check out different routes.

Choose your route carefully. The best way to get someplace by bicycle may not be the way you normally drive. Get a local bicycle map to help you find recommended routes. If a map isn't available, ask someone else who already commutes by bike. Try a few different routes to see how they compare.

Figure out where you'll park. Find out from your employer ahead of time if there are bicycle parking facilities on the premises, or look around to find your best parking options.

Plan your wardrobe. What facilities are available at work for storing work clothes? For freshening up? Will you ride to work in your work clothes, or will you change once you get there? Will you carry your work clothes with you every day or store them at the office?

The Top Ten Excuses for not commuting by bicycle (and how to overcome them)

10. I need my car for work

Many transportation tasks could be handled equally well if not better on a bike. Meet with your employer and see if your company might not benefit from a more environmentally-friendly image if you conducted your business by bike. Consider that many traditional tasks adapt well to cycling, whether it's police work, meter reading, postal delivery, etc.

9. I'd have to get up much earlier if I rode my bicycle

You'd be surprised! Because of traffic in urban areas, cycling generally takes less time than driving for distances of three miles or less, and about the same time for trips of three to five miles. But even if your commute is longer, 30 minutes of extra sleep won't be nearly as invigorating as an early morning ride. You'll arrive at work alert and refreshed. Likewise, your evening ride home should leave you more relaxed since you won't face the aggravation of sitting in rush hour traffic. And you won't have to rush off to an evening work-out to unwind. You'll already have accomplished that! Also, don't forget your savings of time, money (and the environmental benefit) when you eliminate visits to the gas pump.

8. I'm out of shape

If you leave yourself plenty of time and go at an easy pace, you'll find cycling no more difficult than walking. As you ride more, you'll ease your way into better shape, building fitness that is an integral part of your schedule. If you have health problems, consult your family doctor for suggestions on getting started.

7. I can't afford a special commuting bicycle

You don't need one. Your old beater bike gathering dust in the garage will suffice if properly adjusted and maintained, and it's less attractive to thieves. If you have a recreational bicycle you can outfit it with a lightweight rack and bag or use a fanny pack to carry necessary commute items.

With the fixed cost of operating an automobile at around \$0.30/mile, the money you would save commuting by bicycle on an average 10 mile round trip would buy you a \$400 bicycle in six months time.

6. I have to dress nice for work

Some bicycle commuters simply ride in their business attire - they seem to command more respect from motorists. Most ride in casual or cycling clothes and change when they arrive. You can carry your change of clothes in a pack or in panniers on the bike or even transport them back and forth on days when you don't ride.

5. There's no secure place for my bike

There is probably a storage room or closet where your bike can be secured behind a locked door. Maybe you can even take it to your office - what a status symbol! Or check and see if parking is available in nearby buildings or garages. Otherwise, fasten it to an immovable object with a U-bolt lock, preferably where you can see it.

4. I can't shower at work

Depending on the weather, you may not need a shower if you ride at a leisurely pace. If you do, take a washcloth, soap, towel and deodorant and clean up at the restroom sink. Or look for a public facility or health club within walking distance of your workplace where you can shower. Then encourage your employer to install showers where you work.

3. What if it's rainy or cold?

Start as a fair weather bicycle commuter - when the forecast is bad, don't bike. Some people may conquer the elements and commute every day, but it doesn't mean you have to. If you only ride when the weather report is favorable, it will still make a dramatic improvement. The more you enjoy bicycle commuting, the more you'll look forward to your daily ride. You will eventually decide to invest in rainwear and cold weather gear so you can commute year-round!

2. I'd have to ride in the dark

Wear light colored reflective clothing, use a good lighting system and choose a route that avoids major thoroughfares. There are a variety of bike-mounted lights that can help you see and be seen.

1. It's not safe to ride in traffic

The fear of riding in traffic is often much greater than the actual danger. Minimize risk by riding properly - visibly and predictably. In stop-and-go traffic, a fit cyclist can generally keep up with the traffic flow, so it's acceptable to maintain your place in the roadway. Hugging the curb invites danger as cars try to squeeze past you. To help prevent injury, always wear a helmet. You can also reduce the risk of riding in traffic by using less-congested secondary roads. You may travel an extra mile, but you'll be able to enjoy the ride, a worthwhile trade-off.