

WASH 'N' GO

The biggest favour you can do your bike is not to let it get too dirty and to keep it well oiled. This isn't so much a matter of pride as of mechanics – gunk-covered bikes ride badly and their components wear out quickly. A proper cleaning and lubricating routine is a bit of a rigmarole, especially if, like me, you live in a flat with no garden and don't have a special stand to clamp the bike into. But, on those occasions I set aside an hour to do it properly, I often find myself in a weird, Zen-like state, finding peculiar satisfaction in scrubbing my derailleur with a toothbrush and polishing every spoke, something the teenagers on my estate seem to find endlessly amusing.

If you ride every day, other books suggest you wash and oil your bike once a week. This is a lovely theory, but unless you have encountered dreadful weather or taken short cuts across muddy fields, it is probably unnecessary. Rare is the day I don't use my bike, and I only give it a proper clean every couple of months or before a major expedition.

Don't be tempted to go to your local garage and use a high pressure hose to clean your bike. It is too strong, and water could get into internal components. But a gentle garden hose is fine.

WHAT YOU NEED

- A bucket of hot, soapy water. Washing-up liquid is OK
- A special degreasing agent such as Muck-Off, to be sprayed directly on to the really grubby bits
- A sponge or soft rag
- An old toothbrush or, if you prefer, a set of proper bike-cleaning brushes
- Bike-specific lubricant. You are supposed to use different oils for different bits of your bike – liquid for the chain, brake cables and bolts; grease for overhauling bearings and threads (an unlikely task for an amateur). Being a bit of a slattern, I just use a lightish all-round liquid oil such as Finish Line Cross Country for everything. Many people consider household oils such as WD-40 to be a bicycle's nemesis, swearing they can ruin a chain by actually stripping away any existing lubricant. But I've used them in emergencies to no obvious ill effect

- A chain-cleaning machine is very useful but not necessary, as you can just use a toothbrush
- In an ideal world, you'll have a frame stand to clamp your bike into, This will make it easy to turn the pedals and reach inaccessible parts, but you can manage without
You'll probably feel a bit of a saddo watching it, but there is a very good video called 'washing and lubing your bike' on this site: <http://www.youtube.com/group/bicyclemaintenance>

THE WASH

1. ➤ Spray bike wash fluid all over your bike and leave for a minute or so to let the degreasing agents do their thing. Pay special attention to the chainset, front and rear mechs and chain, as they will be the oiliest and dirtiest bits.
2. ➤ Use a brush to poke around your bike to dislodge any bits and bobs stuck behind hard-to-reach parts, and spray more fluid there if necessary.
3. ➤ Starting at the top of your bike, so that you don't dirty already-clean bits, dip the sponge or rag into the soapy water to wipe down the frame, saddle, handlebar and stem, and seat post.
4. ➤ Now is the time to tackle the chain and gear system. If you have a chain-cleaning machine, follow the instructions to clamp the device to the chain and slowly turn the pedals so that all of the chain goes through the machine's internal brushes. Otherwise, dip the toothbrush in more degreaser and then scrub each link of the chain. Use a sponge to clean between the teeth of the sprockets on your rear wheel cassette and the front and rear derailleur.
5. ➤ Take the wheels out and sponge down the inside of the frame forks and underneath the brake callipers and pads. Then clean the wheel rims thoroughly. Squeaky brakes are often caused by dirt, so don't scrimp on this part.

If I'm being lazy and the weather is bad outside, I sometimes give my bike a quick once-over in my hallway when my neighbours have gone to bed, using baby wipes. Seems to do the trick.

THE LUBE

Before you start oiling, make sure the bike is dry, then lubricate the chain, holding a cloth under it as you sparingly apply oil to each link, slowly turning the pedals as you go. Work through all of your gears to get oil on each sprocket and cog. If oil drips off, you've gone overboard, and need to wipe most of it away. The chain should feel dry, with just a smidgen of oil covering it.

Less frequently, you need to give a tiny squirt to:

- All brake cables, where they go in or out of the cable casings
- The front and rear hubs (including the freewheel)
- The front and rear mech
- Pedal axles and any moving parts on your cleats
- Any bolts

NB: Never oil your brake blocks or wheel rims. It will stop them working.



KEEPING YOUR BIKE SILENT

A healthy bike is a silent bike. When yours starts making horrible noises – squealing, screeching, clicking, crunching – diagnose the problem and get it sorted before it sends you batty.

There is an excellent and comprehensive guide to keeping your bike quiet on this website: <http://www.jimlangley.net/wrench/keepitquiet.html>

But here are the common causes:

SQUEAKY BRAKES

Screeching brakes are not dangerous, but they are irritating in the extreme. The first thing to do is ensure your wheel rims are clean, as well as your brake pads. Dust or grime is very often the problem. If that doesn't sort it out, you could fiddle with the position of your brake pads to make sure they hit the rims square on. They shouldn't be touching the tyres at all. Most brake pads feature a mechanism for making this adjustment. It can be done in a minute or so by someone who knows what they are doing, so be nice to a bike mechanic and they might do it for free, or follow the instructions for your particular sort of brakes in a bicycle maintenance book. Sometimes, though, brakes just won't shut up, however much you clean and readjust them. I couldn't silence mine until I replaced both front and back brake pads.

CLICKY GEARS

You may have badly adjusted gears, or are riding in an ill-advised gear, which puts the chain at an extreme angle (e.g. being on the small chainring and the smallest cog). Avoid. If your gears appear to be slipping, i.e. not changing smoothly, the chain might be gunked up. Clean and lubricate it thoroughly. If that doesn't work, you'll either need to learn more about gears from a bike maintenance book, or take it to your local bike shop. If the sprockets on the back of your bike no longer have vicious, evenly pointy teeth but have started to look a little more mellow, prepare to replace worn-out chains and cassettes/freewheels, which isn't cheap.

SQUEALING CHAIN

It needs oiling. If you look at the chain and see bright, shiny links, you've waited too long to add lube. Always try to keep a thin film of lube on the chain, and you'll prevent rust, squeaks, crunchy gear changing and premature wear. Changing your chain occasionally (say every 1,000 miles) is the best thing you can do for your bike. It is a cheap part to replace, but if you let a chain get too worn or rusty, you will have to change the cassette (the sprockets/cogs on the back wheel) at the same time, which is much more expensive.

CREAKY PEDALS

Make sure the crank arm is well lubricated and that you've got the pedals on tight enough. Cleats ('clipless pedals', see p. 66) can also cause problems. If your cleats are metal, grease them lightly, and remember not to wear them in the house afterwards.

NOISY WHEELS

First, check nothing is caught in the spokes. Sometimes, reflectors slightly catch on a spoke, so manoeuvre them about a bit and make sure they're on tightly. Sometimes, the spokes themselves are to blame, especially when they are old. To shut them up, apply a drop of oil at each spoke intersection. Then go around and squeeze pairs of spokes with your hands, which will let the oil work between the spokes. Remember to wipe off any excess oil once you're done. Noisy wheels can also be caused by loose bearings in the wheel hubs, but don't start taking the hub apart unless you know what you're doing.

EMERGENCY REPAIRS

If your bike breaks in the middle of nowhere, there are various field repairs you can carry out to get you to the nearest station. Though it sounds a bit Famous Five, you can stuff a flat tyre with grass and/or newspaper in an emergency, and you can just about fix a broken chain with a paper clip. Just ride gingerly home.

GETTING YOUR BIKE SERVICED

Unless you are an accomplished amateur bike mechanic, you'll need to get your bike professionally serviced at least once a year, ideally twice if you ride every day – once in spring, to prepare for a summer in the saddle, and once in autumn, to get ready for the winter. If you just need a quick fix – a puncture mended or brakes tweaked – many shops offer a drop-in service at the start of the day.

Most bike shops offer different levels of service, from a basic gears-'n'-brakes plus lube job right the way up to the Full Monty, which involves the bike being stripped down, with each cable and bearing checked and regreased and replaced if necessary. Some people baulk at the price of a proper service, which often costs £100 or more. But think of it as your insurance against future problems. A well looked after bike can last decades; a poorly maintained machine won't last a year. You wouldn't expect a car to pass its MOT if it had never been serviced; the same is true of bicycles.

Before you take your bike in for a service, give it a good wash. It will encourage the mechanic to spend time fixing your bike rather than getting it clean enough to see what he or she is doing.

Tales of servicing rip-offs are common so, if you can, only use a reputable bike shop that has been recommended to you by friends. Ideally, get someone who knows about bikes to diagnose the problem before you get there so that no one can con you into replacing irrelevant bits of your bike. Bad bike shops make money by carrying out unnecessary repairs – taking off perfectly fine brake blocks or cables and charging you for new ones is the classic tactic, or announcing that you need to buy new tyres.

TIPS

1. ↘ Agree a price and completion date in advance, and make the bike shop promise to check with you before embarking on any additional work.
2. ↘ Remember that you will have to pay extra for any new parts.
3. ↘ Before you leave the shop, check everything seems in order. Failure to re-attach brakes is a classic.
4. ↘ Unless you had a bad experience there, take your bike to be serviced at the place which sold it to you. Especially if the bike is still quite new, the shop might be obliged (or feel obliged) to fix the problem for free.