

Real Simplifier

How to Give Your Bike a Tune-Up

THE SUN IS SHINING, THE ROAD IS CALLING, AND YOUR BIKE IS IN NEED OF SOME TLC. OUR PLAN WILL GET YOU READY TO RIDE.

By Maggie Puniewska



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WIPE IT DOWN

Remove any debris from the bike. Then fill a spray bottle with one part water and one part household degreaser, like Simple Green All-Purpose Cleaner (\$5 for 32 oz.; homedepot.com). Spritz the frame and wheel spokes and wipe with a rag or old T-shirt. This step could spare you future repairs. "Salt from roads can rust the frame, and car oil picked up on routes can splash through the wheels and keep the brakes from working properly," says Arleigh Greenwald, founder of the Bike Shop Girl Family Cyclery in Aurora, Colorado. Adjust the seat if needed: Sit on the bike and push the pedal all the way down; your leg should be very slightly bent, says Justin Roberts, product manager at Pacific Cycle in Madison, Wisconsin.



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FILL THE TIRES

An easy way to remember what comes next is to think "ABC": air, brakes, and chain. To avoid flats and blowouts, make sure your tires are properly inflated. Look at a tire's sidewall to find the range of numbers indicating the recommended tire pressure in pounds per square inch (PSI). Then hook up a bike pump with a gauge to see if the pressure is within that range. If it's too low, pump up the tire; if it's too high, release some air by depressing the valve. Check the pressure again. If air keeps escaping after you pump, you likely have a leak and need to replace the tube.



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INSPECT THE BRAKES

Your bike has either rim brakes (rubber pads clamp the wheel) or disc brakes (pads clamp a center disc on the wheel). To test their condition, stand to one side of the bike and squeeze both brake levers. There should be at least one inch of space between the levers and the handlebar. If the levers hit the handlebar, your brake pads might need to be adjusted or replaced. "Rim brakes need to be changed when you can't see any indents in the rubber pads," says Greenwald. "Disc brakes should be replaced when pads are shaved down to one millimeter." If the pads look good or the levers still hit the handlebar after you've had the pads changed, your brake cables might need to be adjusted at a bike shop.



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LUBE THE CHAIN

A main cause of bike woes is a dry and dirty chain. To get yours sufficiently slippery, apply a few drops of chain lubricant along the entire chain. Back-pedal a few times to evenly distribute it. Then wipe down the chain with an old rag. This will help remove any extra grease as well as any grime, which can lead to quicker wear. The chain should look like it's gently sweating and leave a light oily residue on your fingers, says Greenwald. Replace rusty, orange-tinted chains; take the opportunity to also tighten bolts securing handlebars and wheels. Notice a broken wheel spoke? Head to a pro.



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AUDIT ACCESSORIES

Check that your helmet, lights, and reflectors are in good working order. The helmet should fit snugly and the straps should be taut. As kids grow, their helmets might need to be switched out annually. All helmets should be replaced if you've been in an accident, if the straps are frayed, or if the foam or plastic is cracked, says Roberts. If your bike is outfitted with lights, make sure they work; replace batteries or charge them up before you ride. No lights? A set (white front lights and red rear lights) costs about \$10, and the glow keeps you visible to cyclists, motorists, and pedestrians.