

Improving street safety for cyclists more effective than information campaigns

September 3 2015



Facts About Cycling

- Cycling is associated with improved cardiovascular fitness, as well as a decrease in the risk of coronary heart disease.
- Bicycling is a great way to increase your longevity, as cycling regularly has been associated with increased 'life-years', even when adjusted for risks of injury through cycling.
- Riding a bike has been linked to improved mental health.
- Cycling can strengthen your immune system, and could protect you against certain kinds of cancer.
- Extend your life. Cycle!



An example of the 'positive' messaging about cycling from the study.

Concerns that telling new cyclists to protect themselves with helmets and hi-viz might make cycling look more dangerous than it is, and thereby inadvertently put people off cycling rather than get them started, appear

to be groundless.

This is according to new research from our Department of Psychology which is likely to reassure [local authorities](#) and charities who have often made safety a key part of their pro-[cycling](#) messages. But the new study also suggests that, if we really want to get more people cycling and improve public health, it's going to take more than words to make any difference.

Stagnating cycling levels

With cycling levels in the UK, like in many parts of the world, stagnating or even declining according to latest official statistics, the authors of the new study wanted to assess ways to encourage more cycling among all in society, in particular those going about their daily business.

In their study, published this month in the Journal of Transport & Health, coinciding with National Cycle to Work Day today (Thursday 3 September), they point to the 'massive health benefits' more cycling would bring.

Through their project they compared the effect of campaigns designed to instil safety messages verses those intended to promote the health benefits on people's cycling intentions and studied the impact of campaigns on the cycling intentions of 228 adults, split between cyclists and non-cyclists.

Whilst they conclude that safety-focused campaigns are unlikely to have any obvious or immediate effect on non-cyclists' perceptions of danger or intentions to start riding, they found that health-focused campaigns made cycling seem more beneficial, specifically among non-cyclists.



Facts About Cycling

- Cycling is a fun, convenient, and healthy way to get around, but if you don't follow basic safety guidelines the results could be very unfunny.
- Cycle safety is no joke.
- In 2001, nearly 3000 teen cyclists aged 12-16 were killed or injured on the roads. If you want to protect yourself you must take cycle safety seriously.
- In a study of admissions to the A&E Department, nearly 50% of injuries suffered by cyclists were to the head and face. Helmets help reduce the numbers of these injuries, and their seriousness.
- Get yourself a helmet!



An example of the 'negative' messaging about cycling from the study.

In recent years, there has been growing concern that safety fears may be turning people off cycling and back into the car, in particular for short, utility journeys, for example a cycle ride to work or to the shops.

This is the first study to test the theory that safety messages might have unintended consequences by drawing attention to risks that people might otherwise not have noticed.

Assessing cycling intentions

Dr Ian Walker, of the Department of Psychology, explained: "The fears

some people had about mentioning safety to prospective new cyclists look to be groundless. This is great, as it means authorities probably haven't inadvertently been scaring people away from cycling all these years with well-meaning safety advice.

"But at the same time, although our study shows health information is useful for non-cyclists, it also shows that information alone isn't going to be enough to make people take up cycling. Safe streets are what will most make the difference if we want to see more cycling."

Dr Tim Gamble, also of the Department of Psychology, said: "Whilst the picture for cycling in certain cities may appear to be suggest it's on the up, across the UK we are seeing uptake actually stagnating or even falling in places.

"In order to increase cycling levels throughout the country and to bring about the enormous benefits active transport can bring to an individual's health and the wider environment we need to rethink how it's promoted with a renewed focus on the enjoyment it can bring.

"The focus on safety concerns seen in certain publicity campaigns in recent years may not be deterring cyclists as much as we had feared. But in our study, although telling people who currently don't cycle about the [health benefits](#) helped them realise how good cycling could be for them, even this didn't make them look more likely to actually get onto a bicycle."

Dr Walker added: "This all suggests that no promotional campaign is going to be enough to get people out of their cars. What's needed is a much more concrete action. That's why it's exciting to see developments like the completely separate superhighways being built right now in London."

Although a handful of UK cities are bucking the trend, most notably London, the overall picture for the UK is gloomier. According to the ONS, the figure for those cycling in their early 30s has remained unchanged over the past decade and for those in their late 20s it has actually dropped.

In recent years, the World Health Organisation (WHO) has indicated that more cycling would dramatically improve public health - indeed, the WHO has speculated that an increase in the number of trips by bike could be 'the single best thing' a society could do for [public health](#).

More information: "Bicycling campaigns promoting health versus campaigns promoting safety: A randomized controlled online study of 'dangerization'," *Journal of Transport & Health*, Volume 2, Issue 3, September 2015, Pages 369-378, ISSN 2214-1405, [dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jth.2015.05.007](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jth.2015.05.007)

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