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Ride Your Bike to Work

You can save money on gas and get some extra exercise

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On a freezing november morning in Chicago, Megan Mason puts on leggings, several polyester tops and a fleece, a windbreaker, four pairs of gloves, and silk sock liners. She ties a bandana over her head, dons earmuffs, snaps on a helmet, safety-pins a scarf into a cocoon around her head, and gets on her bright green Schwinn for a 6½-mile ride to work.



Surely anyone who braves Windy City cold must be a hardcore biker. But Mason, a 27-year-old curriculum analyst at the Northwestern University School of Law, is new to the ranks of cycle commuters—one of thousands of Americans who this year have switched to pedal power. It's too soon for national numbers, but many cities and counties are reporting a surge. In Chicago, 3,500 people rode in a spring Bike to Work day, up from 2,800 last year. Bikestation, a nonprofit that has six indoor parking facilities for cyclists on the West Coast, mainly in downtown neighborhoods, has seen a 30 percent increase in usage in the past year.

The price of gas is a factor, but not the only one. Rookie riders love the exercise and they enjoy the ride. "I explore areas I don't usually see," says Mason, who stays within bike lanes for much of her commute. "I hop off and do errands."

The thought of urban cycling can pose a minicrisis for a newcomer. Mason had to overcome her fear of city streets and dark winter nights. How do you make the leap from wannabe to bike commuter? Cycling gurus are happy to offer advice. First, find out if it's practical. You'll need to come up with a route suitable for a bike. Highways ban cyclists for good reason. Even a 40-mph suburban road can be a daunting experience unless there's a bike lane. You can also look into a split trip—using a bus with a bike rack (or the subway) part way then getting off and pedaling.

Next, do a dry run. Try the commute on a weekend to see how it goes and get a sense of time. That time should stay fairly constant. Cyclists are generally immune from traffic jams—they can simply dismount and walk through them. Next, invest in a carrier. You'll need a place to stash work clothes, lunch, papers. The options are a backpack, a messenger bag, or satchels.

Expect an adjustment period. "It's easy to hop in a car," says Gus Juffer, a manager at Willy Bikes in Madison, Wis. It's not quite as easy to hop on a bike. "Leave plenty of time in the morning," he advises. And obey traffic laws. Some cyclists whiz through stop signs and red lights or head the wrong way on one-way streets. Motorists don't expect the unexpected.

Finally, don't overexert yourself. Nonbikers think that if you bike to work, you must bike home. Not true. A midstream change in plans is fine, too. "I was riding one day and the wind was so strong," recalls Elizabeth Kiker, vice president of the League of American Bicyclists. "I saw my bus, flagged it down, put my bike on the rack, and off I went."

A cash bonus could await if you do join the ranks of bike commuters. The Bicycle Commuter Act, which takes effect in 2009, lets companies offer regular bike commuters a "fringe benefit" of \$20 a month for cycling expenses, either in cash or through a pretax salary allocation. The amount may be small change, but it's a big sign that car-crazy America now recognizes that commuting is also about the bike.

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