

By Kay Cross, MEd, CSCS

Choosing a Stationary Bike

Perhaps you have decided a stationary bike would be ideal for your personal workouts. What research should you do before purchasing one?

Start by going to a specialty equipment store to look at bikes and evaluate their quality of construction, mechanism of resistance, type (upright or recumbent), and seat comfort and adjustability.

Quality Construction

For long-term use, choose a stationary bike with a sturdy frame and a two-piece crankshaft. The crankshaft attaches to the pedal arms and drives the chain or belt. In a one-piece crank, the pedal arms and crank are constructed as one unit. With continuous use, the bearings wear out and the entire shaft must be replaced. Two-piece cranks generally last longer.

Reliable Resistance

Four different resistance mechanisms are currently available: generator-style, electromagnetic, eddy-current braking and friction resistance.

Generator-style resistance uses a computer interface to communicate the desired load to a generator-driven bike chain or belt. Bikes with this type of resistance are freestanding. They are fairly expensive (\$1,100+), but provide a smooth ride.

Electromagnetic resistance provides the smoothest transition from one degree of difficulty to the next. Bikes with this type of resistance require an outlet and are more expensive (\$1,100+) than bikes with either eddy-current braking or friction resistance. Generator-style and electromagnetic resistance bikes are both top of the line.

Bikes with **eddy-current braking** are available in plug-in or freestanding models. They are in the middle price

range (\$500+) and provide a smooth ride. But this type of resistance can become uncalibrated with continuous use. You could set the resistance control knob to the same place every time and not always be working against the same resistance.

Friction resistance, the least expensive (\$350+), uses a flywheel and belt. As the control knob is tightened, the belt tightens on the flywheel, increasing the resistance. The main disadvantage is that the belt will eventually have to be replaced. If you choose a bike with friction resistance, make sure the flywheel weighs more than 30 pounds, since a heavy flywheel ensures smoother pedaling.

Upright or Recumbent?

Stationary bikes can be upright, semi-recumbent or recumbent. **Upright** bikes position the legs below the torso with the exerciser perched above on a small seat. The workout on an upright is more cardiovascularly challenging than on either of the recumbents. Uprights are perfect for outdoor cyclists who need an indoor training option. However, the small bike seat can become uncomfortable during long sessions.

I recommend purchasing a bio-gel seat, which displaces body weight more evenly than most seats provided by the manufacturers.

On a **semirecumbent** bike, the exerciser is seated closer to the floor, with the legs *slightly* below heart level. These bikes are the easiest to mount and dismount and have full-size seats that provide great back support. At the same workload, these bikes are less challenging than the uprights but more challenging than the true recumbents.

A **recumbent** bike positions the seat

closest to the floor, with the exerciser's legs directly in front. The seat is full size and has ample torso and back support. Unfortunately, the low seat can be difficult to get in and out of, making the recumbent bike a poor choice for people who have problems with balance or upper-body strength.

Adjustability and Comfort

Most stationary bikes adjust to fit individuals up to six-feet-four-inches tall. Sit on the bike, adjust the seat to the appropriate distance from the pedals and go for a ride! Is the seat comfortable? For uprights, does the seat tilt forward to allow more comfortable posturing? Does the seat stay in place?

When choosing a stationary bike, look for quality, comfort and good biomechanics and ergonomics. Consult with your trainer. Then enjoy the ride! ●

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