

Bike Maintenance: Keeping it Clean

I used to do all my own mechanical work. In fact, I taught bike repair for both AYH and NYU's Continuing Ed program and spent a summer working in a bike shop. Now I leave the major bearing overhauls to a good shop. I'd rather ride them than fix them. The only thing left is keeping it clean and making minor adjustments.

First, remove the wheels and put them aside. Use a soapy rag or sponge to wipe down the frame to remove road dirt and sweat as needed. If the bike is already wet and dirty you can carefully hose it down, taking care not to squirt water directly at any bearing assemblies or where the seatpost enters the frame. Once or twice a season apply pure carnauba wax, (I use Kit brand), to protect your frame. Make sure the brand you get does not have an abrasive in it, some waxes do, (to polish out minor scratches in car finishes, which are much thicker than the paint on your bike). This works on paint or titanium.

I've tried many different chain lubes over the years, (3-in-1 oil, WD-40, Tri-Flow). The system I'm using now seems to work the best. Starting with a new chain, (it's probably not worth scrubbing a really dirty old chain), totally de-grease it with "Clean Streak", (made by "White Lightening"). This leaves no residue and is NOT a lubricant. Some people use acetone. Any solvent that leaves no oily residue is fine. WD-40 leaves a residue, so avoid it. Then follow with several applications of "White Lightening", (read and follow the label directions). It's a wax based lube dissolved in a solvent that evaporates, leaving the wax. This will not rub off and leave chain marks on your leg, clothing, or on other people when you are in a train or elevator.

Every 200 miles or so apply more "White Lightening". Every once in a while, clean with "Clean Streak" before re-lubing, (especially if you've been caught in the rain).

I've seen people apply White Lightening just prior to starting a ride. This defeats the purpose of using a "dry lube". It takes a few hours for the solvent to evaporate, (my label says 2-5 hours, a friend's did not). If you go out on the road while the White Lightening is still wet, gritty dirt and dust will get stuck in the wet lube and contaminate it. Lube the night before your ride.

For things like brake and gear pivot points, I use "Tri-Flow" which I apply sparingly and wipe off any excess left on the surface.

Now clean the wheels. I got this tip for curing squeaky brakes from David Hallerman: Clean the rims with steel wool, (I use Brillo in the bath tub), and go over the brake blocks with emery cloth.

If you don't make a habit of riding in the wet, this method will keep your bike running showroom clean all season.

Another advantage of keeping your bike clean is that in the process of cleaning the bike you will notice small problems before they become large problems. I was cleaning my bike before the 4th of July weekend and as I was wiping it down the pedal came off the pedal axle. The locknut unscrewed and the pedal came apart. If I'd not cleaned the bike, the pedal would have come apart on the road. Inspect the tires when you clean. Look for cuts in the tread that distort the casing and/or allow the innertube to protrude.

Speaking of tires, get and use a floor pump if you don't have one. Pump your tires to the rated pressure before each ride. You will get fewer flats. For use on rides get a full size frame fit pump or a Topeak RoadMorph. Mini pumps just don't cut it on the road, and many are as heavy as some full size frame pumps.

If your brakes and gears are properly set up and the cables are pre-stretched by your mechanic, you will have to make few if any adjustments in the course of a riding season.