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There's a good reason cyclists don't always hug the curb

I exercise for one reason only: My doctors force me to.

Perhaps "force" is too harsh a word. Perhaps I should use "encourage" or "suggest" but when I'm sitting on an examining table getting a lecture, it doesn't feel like a suggestion.

That's because, unlike folks who say they love to "feel the burn," I would rather sleep than sweat. I rationalize eating peanut M&Ms by saying the six grams of protein per serving more than make up for the 250 calories of fat. Left to my own devices, I'd be a 400-pound slug.

But about four years ago, my body erupted with strange and seemingly unrelated symptoms and I felt like I was auditioning for a reality show called "America's Next Mystery Disease."

Sundry expensive tests and treatments later, three of the six doctors on the medical merry-go-round said 45 minutes of "hard sweating" exercise six days a week would, if not cure whatever ailed me, make me feel better.

"I already exercise," I protested. "I walk two miles a day."

"Walking," they scoffed, "hardly counts."

The theory behind their treatment read like a mathematical equation: Hard exercise = endorphin release = lowered stress hormones = less heart palpitations, coughing fits, nausea and depression about all three.

At that time, I woke each day feeling as though I'd been a victim of defenestration and spent the next hours with my heart in the fight-or-flight dance, so a prescription of rising at O'dark-30 to torture myself on a cross-trainer didn't sound too bad.

One thousand, three hundred and sixty-eight days later, I still don't like exercise, but if I go more than 48 hours without it, my symptoms return and I remember that Exercise Is My Friend.

Which brings me to cycling. After a steamy summer in the gym, the gorgeous fall weather calls like a siren and I pull out my bike and hit the roads for some of my "hard sweating" sessions. I'm not a professional by any stretch, riding only two or three times a week, 10 to 17 miles a time. My claim to fame is surviving the 35-mile section of the 2006 El Tour de Tucson on a mountain bike after only 12 days of training.

But even as an amateur, I know a few things:

- * Motorists can be dangerous.
- * Cyclists who fail to yell "On your left" when passing can be dangerous.
- * Joggers refusing to exit the bike lane when cyclists are approaching can be dangerous.

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* Bike shorts only look good on thin, muscular people.

I don't think most motorists are intentionally dangerous around cyclists. They just don't understand, for instance, why cyclists ride so close to the white line dividing the bike lane from the traffic lane.

I, too, wondered that before I started cycling. (Along with this: Why did a group of brightly spandexed cyclists always arrive at my favorite coffee shop two minutes before I drove there, buying up all the good pastry?)

But having spent a goodly number of hours in the saddle, I now know that Tucson's bike lanes are frequently filled with tiny road debris - rocks, nails, shards of wood, small children's' toys - that motorists can't see. That stuff is a bike wreck waiting to happen.

Of course, you don't have to take my word for it. Three-time Olympian Gord Fraser, one of Tucson's most storied cyclists and a trainer with Carmichael Training Systems, knows what I say is true. (He didn't go on the record about the bike shorts assessment, but I'm certain he agrees.)

"We tell cyclists to ride as far to the right as possible," Fraser said. "But although Tucson is one of the best cities in the country for cyclists, there's also lots of small debris motorists can't generally see. In those cases a cyclist might have to leave the bike lane."

Fraser advises cyclists to avoid the main thoroughfares as much as possible, stay as far right as is safe and signal motorists well in advance of turns.

But with the Tour coming up Nov. 22, the roads are packed with cyclists training for routes that are as long as 109 miles, so motorists are going to see blurs of spandex on every road en masse in the coming weeks. So Fraser - and folks like me just trying to follow doctor's orders - urge motorists to take some extra care.

"Compared to other parts of the country, Tucson has very good relationships between cyclists and motorists," Fraser said. "But motorists, hey, just be patient. It's no big deal to give a cyclist a few more yards of space. Just take a breath and take the time to pass a cyclist safely. They aren't there to aggravate you or get in the way. They're just trying to get some exercise or get from point A to point B."

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