It's good to hear cycling to work reduces your risk of dying. But that's not why I do it

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The latest study on the health benefits of cycling suggests it can cut the risk of cancer and heart disease. It’s also the most fun you can have on your daily commute

It may not be a surprise to see [another study suggesting that cycling to work can drastically reduce your chances of getting cancer and heart disease](http://www.bmj.com/content/357/bmj.j1456) – those who ride bikes for transport already know how good it makes them feel. However, it’s perhaps yet another motivation for those who don’t, to dust off their bikes – and remember some other reasons cycling to work is so great.

In a five-year study of 263,450 UK commuters, [published in the BMJ](http://www.bmj.com/content/357/bmj.j1456), researchers at Glasgow University found regular cycling cut the risk of death from any cause by 41%, and the incidence of cancer and heart disease by 45% and 46% respectively.

The cyclists in the study were riding an average of 30 miles per week; that’s three miles each way, five days per week. [Cycling](https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/cycling) at a leisurely 10mph, that would take about 20 minutes each way – a manageable distance for most people.

At present only 3% of the UK population commute by bike, while 36% use a car. If we increased cycling in this country to German levels by 2025, we would save £1.8bn in health benefits and £284m thanks to less congestion.

Ask anyone who cycles to work why they do it, and they’ll have a story to tell, whether it’s about how good it makes them feel, how they saved money, lost weight, or won a battle with depression. Most people will tell you how enjoyable it is.

My commuting story began at university. I remember being astonished one morning when I realised my friend Szilvia had cycled from Finsbury Park in the rain. Getting on a bike and riding five miles in such conditions sounded miserable, but she looked happy and bright, and told me how great it was.

We lived fairly close to one another and she offered to ride with me one day. As I pedalled frantically to keep up with her through Regent’s Park, and Camden, it was like I’d grown wings. Before long, like her, nothing short of a gale force wind with pigeon-sized hailstones was going to stop me from experiencing this feeling every day.

For the first time in my life I started getting fit. I arrived at university feeling awake, alert, and generally in a good mood. I continued to cycle to various temp jobs around London after graduation, carrying my work clothes in a pannier and getting changed in the loos.

On crisp, sunny mornings, I’d cycle through the city feeling like it had rolled out the red carpet just for me. I’d levelled up on urban living: I’d whizz past the stationary traffic and queues for buses and try not to look too smug.

I’d chat to others at the traffic lights. Often I’d get to places quicker than public transport could carry me. Often it was the best part of the day.

Fitting exercise into your daily routine is infinitely easier than trying to carve out a slice of it to go to the gym. Without even trying, you get fitter if you cycle. It is no surprise that levels of physical activity are declining as fewer people cycle or walk to work.

In the cities of cycle friendly countries, such as the Netherlands and Denmark, [up to 41% of people commute by bike](https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2016/nov/30/cycling-revolution-bikes-outnumber-cars-first-time-copenhagen-denmark) because it’s easy to do and it feels safe. Decades of investment in cycling infrastructure have made it that way. These countries have learned that most people prefer protected, direct routes on main roads, [and low-traffic neighbourhood streets](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/bike-blog/2016/nov/21/no-room-for-bikes-how-one-street-shows-the-uk-wide-failure-over-cycling). This means people of any age can cycle, from the very young to the elderly. In the Netherlands, for example, [20% of 80-84 year olds regularly cycle](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/bike-blog/2014/oct/16/why-cyling-is-great-for-everyone-not-just-cyclists).

 Imagine if the UK was like the Netherlands, where 20% of 80-84 year olds regularly cycle. Photograph: Rory Buckland L/Alamy Stock Photo

In the UK, meanwhile, we’ve had decades of car-centric planning, and minuscule levels of funding for cycling. Even though cycling is statistically safe, [it doesn’t always feel it](https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2015/mar/24/cycling-near-miss-close-pass-road-rage), and this fear of sharing road space with motor traffic is the key reason people don’t cycle or stop after trying it.

The government [knows that every £1 spent on cycling brings £5.50 of benefits](https://www.cyclinguk.org/sites/default/files/economic_cycle_-exec_summary.pdf), but at present it spends just 72p per person per year on cycling, [compared with £86 per person per year for roads](http://www.cyclinguk.org/blog/samjones/cycling-walking-receive-morethanmilk). [There is huge potential for more journeys to be cycled](https://www.theguardian.com/environment/bike-blog/2017/apr/13/how-much-could-commuter-cycling-increase-in-your-part-of-england) if that were to change.

Increased levels of cycling can bring benefits for everyone, whether they cycle or not. Bicycles take up far less road space than cars and emit no toxic fumes. [They’re good for our high streets](http://www.citylab.com/cityfixer/2015/03/the-complete-business-case-for-converting-street-parking-into-bike-lanes/387595/): on New York streets where cycle lanes were introduced average trade rose by a quarter. What’s more, bicycles are great social levellers – according to research, [mass cycling could increase mobility of the nation’s poorest families by 25%](https://www.britishcycling.org.uk/zuvvi/media/bc_files/campaigning/BENEFITS_OF_INVESTING_IN_CYCLING_DIGI_FINAL.pdf).

If a magic pill were invented that could generate all of these benefits, we would be falling over ourselves to buy it. As it is, no magic is required, just steady, long-term planning and investment, and a commitment to the humble bicycle, so that more of us can enjoy the simple, life-giving joy of cycling from A to B.