Clean Your Drivetrain – Keep Those Gears Spinning

“It takes too much time”

“I always get greasy and dirty”

“I can never get them clean enough”

“No one else does it”

“I’ve never cleaned my chain”

“I don’t know how”

(Note: These are not acceptable excuses)

Keeping your drivetrain clean is just like changing the oil in your car. Cleaning and lubing your gears and chain extend their lifespan, make for easier shifting and quieter riding. There are just a few simple and easy steps to keeping your bike’s chain clean and happy. How often you clean your chain is a function of how and where you ride. If you only ride on sunny days and only on nice paved roads, you can go a few rides between cleanings. If you ride out of Hoover in the fall, and ride the chip ‘n seal roads, you should clean your chain after every-other ride. This whole process takes less than 5 minutes, if you keep at it and don’t let the chain get filthy.

We’ll start out with a chain that is fairly new and/or is just a little bit dirty.

Two ingredients:

1. An old washcloth – These are the best rags I’ve found. The high thread count, really nice ones are unfortunately the best. They don’t ravel and get torn up as easily as the cheap ones. However, modern 10 speed gears favor the thinner, less expensive brands.

2. A can/bottle of lube – Whichever you use is fine. Everyone has their own personal favorite. I like Tri-Flow, others swear by White Lightning. What you use isn’t as important as that you use something! By the way, WD-40 IS NOT A LUBRICANT. Do not use WD-40 to lube your chain. Don’t even use it to clean the chain, because it’s going to get everywhere, including on your rims, which is going to make your brakes slip and slide instead of grip and stop.

Step 1: Wipe the chain with a rag. (Figure 1) Grab the chain along the bottom and back-pedal the cranks about 10-20 revolutions. Rubbing the rag back and forth along the bottom section of chain works very well, too. You will see long, nasty, black streaks on the rag. Keep rubbing until the streaks get significantly lighter. The more dirt you can get out of the chain, the better off you’ll be.

Step 2: Shift to the largest gear in the back. Hold one edge of the washcloth very tight and “floss” between each cog of the cassette. (Figure 2) Rub up and down about 15 times between each gear (As you do this, the cassette will turn all the way around and you’ll wipe all the teeth) This dislodges gunk and shines up the gears. Once you get up to the bigger cogs, shift the chain back down to the little gear and finish the last space and the back of the big gear.
Step 3: Shift to the little chainring. Wipe down the big chainring. *(Figure 3)* Hit all the teeth, even the ones behind the crank. Use the same flossing technique to get the backside.

Step 3a: Shift to the big chainring. Wipe down the little chainring(s).

Step 3b: Wipe off the cranks while you’re at it, they’ll look shiny and snazzy.

Step 4: Leave the chain up on the big chainring. Grab your lube and drip one drop onto every barrel of the chain. *(Figure 4)* You want to hit the little round cylinders in between the side links. The easiest way to do this is to gently squeeze the bottle as you back pedal the cranks. The anal riders among us actually count links or start at the chain’s quicklink to verify they lube the entire chain. The sly rider simply spins the cranks 2½ times around. Since most bike chains have about 116 links, 2½ turns of a regular crank moves 133-ish links past the bottle of lube.

Stop applying lube and continue spinning the cranks backward a few more turns. This works the lube into the chain pivot pins and also works dirt out of the pins.
**Step 5:** Wipe the chain again. Use a clean section of the washcloth so you can see if there’s still a bunch of dirt coming out of the chain. You WILL still see dirt on the rag, but it’ll be less than before.

**Step 6:** You’re done, go riding.

If you’re starting out with a VERY dirty chain, you’ll have to use more drastic methods to get the crud off (and out) of the chain.

You will need either a chain cleaning box or actually remove the chain to give it a good cleaning.

A chain cleaning box clamps around the bottom section of the chain and uses cleaning fluid and internal brushes to scrub the chain squeaky clean. There are lots of environment friendly cleaners at the bike shops (I use Simple Green). Run the chain through the box about 30 turns of the cranks, and keep replacing the fluid with fresh until it comes out clean and the chain is spotless. You will drip nasty cleaning fluid on the floor, so do this outside, in the garage, over a towel or chunk of scrap carpet. Wipe/dry the chain very well with your washcloth and let it dry for a while.

If you’ve got a quick connect chain, it’s pretty simple to remove the chain and let it soak in a container of cleaner. Soak it for a few minutes to a few hours if it is really gunked up. Wipe it down to remove all the external grime and let it air dry. When dry, re-install and continue with Step 4.

If you’ve gotten any dirty chain grime, cleaning fluid or lube on your rear wheel, clean the whole rim with rubbing alcohol. Make sure you get the entire braking surface or you’ll have reduced braking.

By Mike Perakis Ride Director 2007