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Nerve Compression Injuries: Too Much Pressure in the Wrong Places

Jordan D. Metzl, MD

Since most triathletes spend at least half of their training and racing time on their bikes, it is to be expected that certain injuries will result from time spent in the saddle. Some of these injuries come from putting too much pressure on nerves that get trapped between pressure points on the bike and the body. In this column we'll look at two common nerve compression injuries.

Shannon is a 30-year-old triathlete who lost feeling and some function in her pinky and ring finger of her left hand. She came into the office and said, "Hey, Dr. Metzl, I look like I'm giving the sign from Mork and Mindy – Nanoo, Nanoo. I don't like it at all."

Shannon was describing symptoms caused by compression of the ulnar nerve in her hand casused by pressure from the handlebar when riding. The ulnar nerve runs just beneath the skin on the outside of the hand, through a small area called Guyon's canal. When there is too much pressure between a cyclist's hand and the handlebar, this nerve may become injured. The primary symptom is numbness caused by interference with the sensation in the outside part of the hand. Sometimes the function of the muscles in this area is also disrupted, leaving the rider looking like Mork.

The way to fix this injury is to avoid keeping your hands in one position too long by moving them between the drops, the hoods and the handlebars. Sometimes it also helps to lower the seat position and strengthen the core muscles to take weight off the hands. Cycling gloves may also lessen pressure on the ulnar nerve.

Shannon's hand took a few months to improve, but it eventually did. She is now more careful with her hand position.

The other common nerve-compression injury happens lower down on the body. David, a 46-year-old triathlete, could tell you exactly where. We were enjoying a long ride together when he said, "Jordan, after my long training rides, my bike performance goes up, but my bedroom performance leaves much to be desired. Is this normal?"

I asked him for more information and found out that David commonly experienced numbness and erectile dysfunction after long rides, and that the symptoms worsened as he spent more time in the saddle.

David was describing compression of the pudendal nerve, which runs just beneath the ischial tuberosity, otherwise known as the sit bones. Men can experience erectile dysfunction and women can develop numbness as the result of too much time in a saddle that doesn't fit properly.

Athletes can alleviate this problem by getting a better bike seat. The qualities to look for are comfort, comfort and comfort. Make sure that you feel comfortable in the saddle, and make sure that the symptoms David described aren't happening to you. If they are, be sure to stand up every once in a while, and try to change the pressure point in your saddle by shifting forward and backward on the saddle periodically during longer rides. David changed his seat and got in the habit of standing more frequently during rides. Now he shows up for every workout wearing a broad smile.

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Nerve compression injuries are common in triathletes, but the good news is that with careful attention, they can usually be prevented. ▲

Jordan D. Metzl, MD, (DrJordanMetzl.com) is a nationally recognized sports medicine specialist at Hospital for Special Surgery in New York City. In addition to his medical practice, Dr. Metzl is a 25-time marathon runner and six-time Ironman finisher.