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## Expert Answers

### Proper Handlebar Height

### Tom's Question.

**I just started road biking. I have found a lot of information regarding seat height, but nothing on adjusting handlebar height. Is there a rule of thumb on how high or low a handlebar should be in relation to seat height?**

### Ethan Gelber's Answer.

Seat height and position, and handlebar height and position, should be part of the same adjusting and bike-sizing process. Unfortunately, this is seldom the case. Cyclists' awareness of proper fit is usually limited to saddle height. After all, the size of your bike frame and the subsequent height-related tweakings are of primary concern when purchasing a bike. Plus, knee pain — the principal ache resulting from a poorly sized bike — is often the first to hit and can be the most acute.



However, improperly placed handlebars can and often do result in a whole host of secondary aches that can be just as pernicious as knee discomfort. On the one hand, if you place your handlebars too low, you may be leaning too far forward and heavily on your hands, placing too much pressure on your palms (leading to numbness in your fingers) and absorbing too much vibration through your arms and in your shoulders (causing elbow, shoulder, and upper back pain). On the other hand, if the bars are placed too high, you may be relying too heavily on your lower back and sitting too heavily in the saddle. You should additionally consider the angle of the handlebars relative to the position of the brake/gear shift mechanisms. If you have to reach too far to grip the brake levers or manipulate the shift switches, the resulting pain in your overtaxed fingers will keep you just as far from your bike as knee gripe.

(Keep in mind that there may also be other reasons why your hands, arms, shoulders, and back ache.

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Proper pedaling posture is just as important as proper bike fit. Ask a friend who is an experienced cyclist to watch you and give you pointers. Ask specifically about how straight and angled your back is, how your arms look [bent versus stiff], and how relaxed your shoulders are.)

So what is best? As with everything, there is a basic rule of thumb that will help you find a position more right than wrong. That said, each rider should experiment until an appropriate measure is discovered. Torso, arm, and finger lengths differ, as do hand size and the relative strengths of hand, arm, and back muscles. Make minor adjustments until you eliminate real pain, and then work on feeling comfortable in that position.

Rule of thumb: In general, the top of the handlebar should be about one or two inches lower than the top of your saddle (for accomplished cyclists interested in aerodynamics [on the road] and good weight distribution [off-road] sometimes as much as four inches). The important thing is to have your upper body leaning forward over the pedals but not too stretched out or constricted. Whatever you do, *always* respect the minimum-insertion mark clearly stamped on all handlebars. With any less than two inches of stem in the head tube, you run the risk of weakening or breaking the mechanism.

For more information about this — and saddle height/angle adjustment — please read Rick Lovett's excellent article about [Adjusting a Bicycle](#).

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