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Clipless pedals & cleats explained | Cycle Shoes buying guide



If you want to ride your road bike with more power, efficiency, and speed, you will need to wear road cycle shoes with cleats and use clipless pedals on your bike. This can be a daunting prospect for a beginner, but this guide will answer all your questions and explain everything you need to know about road shoes, cleats, and clipless pedals as well as giving advice on how to buy the right cycle shoes.

Clipless Pedals, Cleats & Cycle Shoes

You will need three things in order to 'clip in' when cycling: clipless pedals, cleats, and road cycle shoes. When you buy your clipless pedals, they will come with compatible cleats. These cleats bolt onto your road cycle shoes and this is what allows you to 'clip in' to your pedals.

Why are they called clipless pedals?

This is usually the first question that crops up, as 'clipping into clipless pedals' doesn't seem to make much sense on the surface. Experienced cyclist and Sundried ambassador Dan Walsh explains, "Clipless pedals were the brainchild of French company Look who took the technology they'd developed for skiing and applied it to cycling in the 1980s. Before this, cyclists attached their feet to their pedals with toe clips so when these disappeared we were left with the clipless pedals we know today."

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So, because modern pedals don't use toe clips, they are known as clipless pedals, even though the popular terminology for attaching your cleats to them is known as 'clipping in'.



Types of clipless pedal and cleats: buying guide

The first thing you'll want to do is buy a set of clipless pedals to attach to your bike. Some road bikes don't even come with pedals so you will need these before you can ride.

There are a few main players in the world of clipless pedals: Shimano, Look, Speedplay and Time, however it's the Look Keo and Shimano SPD-SL pedals that dominate the market and most cyclists and triathletes will be found using them.

Shimano SPD-SL Pedals and Cleats

There are main two types of Shimano pedal and cleat: SPD and SPD-SL. SPD are two-bolt while SPD-SL are three bolt, making them more like the Look Keo cleats. SPD cleats/pedals are mostly for mountain bikes and spin bikes whereas the SPD-SL cleats/pedals are mainly for road bikes. A big difference between the two is that SPD pedals are double sided so you can clip in on either side, whereas SPD-SL pedals are one-sided so you'll need to flip them with your foot to the right side before you can clip in.

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SPD-SL pedals and cleats are very popular and common among road cyclists. They use a three-bolt system and will be compatible with most road cycle shoes.



SPD pedals and cleats use a two-bolt system and are more common for mountain shoes as well as for use on spin bikes.

Float

SPD-SL cleats come in three measurements of 'float' which is the amount of movement a rider can feel when clipped in. The three types of float are colour-coded yellow, blue and red. Yellow has the most float, red is completely fixed with zero float, and blue sits somewhere in between.

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As a beginner, you'll want to start out with yellow SPD-SL cleats until you feel ready for something with less movement.

Adjusting the tension of your cleats

Triathlon coach John Wood says, "Most cleats/pedals have adjustable tension, meaning you can get a greater connection with the pedals and hopefully generate more power. But on the flip side, when you are starting out, loosen the tension as far as you can. This will make it easier to clip in and clip out and give you more confidence. You can tighten them up later."

When fitting your cleats to your shoes there's a degree of adjustment allowed that lets you move the cleat forward, back or twist it left or right. There are lots of videos and articles online showing how to set yours up but it's not an exact science - we're all different shapes and sizes - the most important thing is that you're comfortable and can pedal efficiently.



Road Cycle Shoes Buying Guide

Once you've bought your clipless pedals which will come with the compatible cleats, it's time to buy yourself a pair of road cycle shoes. A good pair of **road cycle shoes**, like those by Sundried, will be compatible with both Look Keo and Shimano SPD-SL cleat designs as they both use a three-bolt design, but it's important to check before you buy.

The important thing to remember is that SPD-SL cleats use a three-bolt fixing just like Look Keo whereas SPD cleats use a two-bolt fixing, so you need to be careful when shopping for road cycle shoes, making sure to choose shoes with the right number of holes for your cleats.

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Road Cycle Shoes vs Triathlon Shoes

The experts from **Cycles UK** explain the differences between road cycle shoes and more specific triathlon shoes.

Triathlon shoes differ to a traditional road bike or mountain bike shoe in several ways. One such way is that triathlon shoes feature more ventilation points to allow your feet the opportunity to dry after your swim.

Another important difference is the necessity for speedy transitions during triathlon. A lot of triathletes keep their shoes clipped into their pedals and then put their feet into their shoes as they begin their cycle. Triathlon shoes are quick and easy to get on to facilitate this. Triathlon shoes feature a heel strap so the athlete can quickly pull them on and either a Velcro fastening or a dial system so they can fasten the shoes while cycling.

Another big difference between road cycle shoes and triathlon shoes is that some triathlon shoes will be compatible with both two-bolt and three-bolt cleats whereas most road shoes will only be compatible with the Look Keo or SPD-SL three-bolt cleats and pedals.



Triathletes need a speedy transition so will keep their shoes clipped into the pedals and take their feet out so they can run straight off the bike.

Getting used to cycling with clipless pedals

Triathlete Dan Walsh explains the process of getting used to clipping in and out of your pedals.

With your pedals fitted to the bike and cleats fitted to shoes, it's time for a trial run. The best place to practise as a beginner is indoors, ideally a hallway or corridor where you have walls either side of you that you can lean against. Hop up onto the bike and with one pedal in the 6

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o'clock position, hook the front of the cleat into the pedal and then press down into the pedal until you hear that satisfying 'click'.

It sounds tricky but you'll soon get it so don't be put off if it takes a few attempts to engage. Once one foot is in, move the other pedal (by pedalling backwards 180 degrees) into the 6 o'clock position and clip the other foot in. If you're finding it very hard to clip in, you can adjust the clip tension on each pedal with an Allen key; as a beginner I'd suggest you loosen the tension as much as you can to make life easy.

Now, you're clipped in with both feet and leaning against the wall to keep you upright, well done! Time to start pedalling - backwards. I know it sounds weird but just turn the pedals round nice and easy so that you get a feel for being clipped in. The next step is un-clipping. This is done by flicking your heel (left or right, up to you) away from the bike. You'll feel the cleat become dis-engaged from the pedal and free to put down on the ground when you need to. Practise clipping in and out a few times with pedalling in between.

Once you're comfortable indoors, it's time to venture onto the open road. Choose a quiet time of day on quiet roads and try to relax. Cycle along slowly and practice stopping and starting and clipping in and out. Don't worry if you feel as though you're doing it all wrong at first, you're not. I've been cycling clipless for years but still faff around at green lights getting clipped in every so often so no one is an expert.

Keep practising and very soon it'll become second-nature. As you become a clipless convert, it's important to remember why cyclist use them: it improves pedalling efficiency by allowing us to transfer power to the bike on the down and up stroke so once you're comfortable try to concentrate on your pedalling technique and pushing down and pulling up with your legs.

As a seasoned clipless rider, my top tip would be to always look and think ahead: if traffic lights are amber start slowing down and getting ready to un-clip well in advance, you don't need to sprint up to a red light, slam on the brakes and topple over because you can't un-clip in time, that's just embarrassing and painful, so be aware and be prepared.

With practise comes familiarity and you'll soon be clipping in and out with ease and wondering what all the fuss was about and why you didn't adopt clipless sooner!

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