

Expert advice

# Q&A

YOUR TECHNICAL, LEGAL, AND HEALTH QUESTIONS ANSWERED. **THIS ISSUE:** MOSQUITO BITES, V-BRAKES WITH DROPS, ICY CYCLEWAYS, AND MORE

## MEET THE EXPERTS



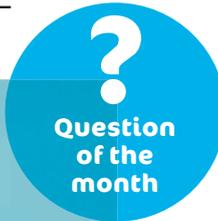
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Left: Nature Photographers Ltd / Alamy

Prevention is better than cure

## Health

# MOSQUITO MENACE

**Q** Yesterday I rode around a local nature reserve – former gravel pits, now landscaped pools. It was warm and humid. Before I realised what was happening, I had an itchy white weal on my arm. I then collected a dozen bites on my legs. The biter was a brownish fly about 7mm long, possibly *Culiseta annulata*, a large native mosquito. The bites are now itchy raised lumps up to 3cm across. Can you recommend a strong over-the-counter remedy? I have found Anthisan pretty useless. Tea tree oil isn't helping a lot either. Thornyone, via the Cycling UK Forum

**A** An apparent mosquito magnet myself, I sympathise. Good news: you can save yourself money by visiting the local supermarket instead of the chemist. Bad news: there is little evidence of anything

helping to alleviate bites. It just takes time.

The usual advice involves a weak steroid cream and antihistamine tablets such as loratadine or cetirizine, which are available at your local supermarket. The tablets may be more effective if taken before being bitten, and immunologists often advise taking them more often than the standard once-daily dosage; I usually take one twice daily. Hydrocortisone cream is harmless, despite the hysteria the word 'steroid' seems to induce, but requires a visit to the pharmacy to buy a tiny, overpriced tube, and has no proven benefit. Antihistamine creams, such as Mepyramine, also have no evidence of benefit, and are not recommended as they are linked to occasional skin reactions.

Insect bites rarely get infected, but if you get a pain rather than itch, and a spreading redness that's tender to touch, you need to

see someone who can prescribe an antibiotic and knows when to prescribe it. Very severe local reactions may justify a routine referral to an immunologist.

In the event of rare, generalised reactions, such as wheezing, breathlessness and feeling faint, dial 999 immediately. And similarly with bites to the tongue or mouth, as local swelling can block the airway.

Avoiding being bitten is the best option, but whilst everyone and their dog can recommend something that works for them, evidence is lacking for most. Proven repellents include DEET (20-50%), PMD (p-Menthane-3,8-diol 30%), and Icaridin (20-50%). DEET is the World Health Organisation's 'gold-standard', Icaridin may be less irritant, and PMD is a botanical, hence the choice for those who prefer 'natural'. Adequate quantities and re-application help.

Be grateful that, despite global warming, we have no malaria, dengue fever, or similar yet in the UK.

**Doug Salmon**

### Technical BRAKING (SLIGHTLY) BAD

**Q** My 25-year-old steel Raleigh bike has Shimano CT90M Altus cantilever brakes, which provide adequate stopping performance but not as good as the V-brakes on bikes I have tried. Would V-brakes fit my bike? I am looking at either Shimano Alivio or possibly Shimano XT BR-T780.

Bob Vineer

**A** Linear-pull brakes – V-brake is Shimano’s name for them – fit standard cantilever brake bosses, so substituting one type for the other is a straightforward bolt-on. It’s easier when replacing cantilevers with V-brakes as the latter do not need cable hangers. However, standard V-brakes require brake levers that pull more inner wire than brake levers suitable for cantilever brakes – i.e. most drop-handlebar models. This includes dual-control drop-bar brake levers, or ‘brifters’, which can be made to work with V-brakes by using a Travel Agent or similar cable pull modifier. If you use bar-end or down tube derailleur shift levers, or even ‘thumbies’, take a look at Tektro RL520 aero levers, which are designed to work with V-brakes. Any flat handlebar brake lever suitable for V-brakes will also work fine.

Richard Hallett



Tektro RL520 linear-pull lever

### Legal COUNCIL’S COLD COMFORT

**Q** Last winter, I noticed that the cycle lanes I use in London are regularly gritted. Nearer home, the council refuses to do so. Their position is that they ‘do not promote the use of



Councils clear some routes

bicycles during periods of prolonged hazardous conditions’, although they do treat routes for all other road users (including car, bus, and foot travellers). As part of my home city’s cycle network, there’s a new cycle bridge suspended over a river. It is prone to icing, and I’ve seen five accidents due to ice there in the last year. Most fallers suffered minor injuries but one was taken away by ambulance with what looked like a broken leg. What are councils’ obligations to treat cycleways in winter conditions?

M Shaffer

**A** Ice on the road is an inevitable peril of the winter months. We assume that our local councils are doing all that they can to grit our pathways, cycle lanes, and roads to protect against hazards such as falls and slips. According to the Local Government Association, the various highway authorities are responsible for nine out of ten roads. They will grit on average 41% of roads in England and Wales.

The question, therefore, is: what are the legal duties for clearing snow and ice from roads and pathways? While most pavements fall under the definition of ‘highway’, it is often down to the individual authorities to determine whether or not they should be gritted. Under the Highways Act 1980, Section 41 (1A), it is explained that a highways authority ‘is under a duty to ensure, so far as is reasonably practicable, that safe passage along a highway is not endangered by snow or ice.’

However, the decisions on which surfaces

to grit are determined by criteria such as how busy the particular road or pavement is, or if there are alternative routes that could be used. Thus many minor roads and pavements are not treated at all.

Although our councils are responsible for around 225,000 miles of road, it would be deemed to be too expensive for them to grit every inch. Often the highway authority will rely upon the goodwill of people using local grit bins. They may also provide an avenue of contact, so that people can coordinate with them on gritting areas that need clearing.

In essence, the busier roads and highways will receive more attention due to the higher risk of an incident occurring. However, communication with your local council might provide you with the means of clearing roads or cycleways that they do not normally touch. In this instance, it may be worthwhile complaining to the local council about the number of accidents in order to bring this matter to their attention.

Where you have suffered significant injury on a road that you feel should have been gritted, particularly in a busier area, then you should contact the Cycling UK Incident Line – tel: 0844 736 8542.

Richard Gaffney

### Technical KEEP ME POSTED

**Q** I have a Peugeot Boston bike that is about 25 years old. As and when components wear out, I upgrade them. Currently I am looking for a new seatpost. The problem is that the existing



post has a diameter of 24mm. The smallest size I have seen advertised is 25.4mm. Do you know of anywhere that stocks seatposts 24mm in diameter?  
John Courtney

**A** This is a vanishingly rare seatpost size. The only new component I have found is advertised on eBay, comes from Germany, has no saddle rail cradle, and is chrome-plated steel. A 23.4mm post with cradle is available from Decathlon ([decathlon.co.uk](http://decathlon.co.uk)). It comes with a couple of shims, but if neither fits it could conceivably be made to work with a suitable sleeve made from a beer or soft drink can.  
Richard Hallett

**Technical TYRED OUT**

**Q** I have a 23mm Michelin Pro 4 Endurance tyre on my back wheel. I'm starting to think it's getting a bit worn, but my question is: 'How do I know?' Gatorskins have those little 'holes' that give you an indication of wear, but there's nothing on the Michelins. Do I have to take the tyre off and feel the rubber between finger and thumb, or is there a better way?  
CJ Hancock, via the Cycling UK Forum

**A** In the absence of a legal minimum for cycle tyre tread depth, some cyclists

With many tyres, you can use the tread pattern as a wear gauge



have been known to wait until the carcass fabric shows through before replacing a tyre, whether it's slick, provided with a wear indicator, or heavily treaded. This is a desperate measure and the tyre should ideally be replaced before it gets to that state. However, the last few molecules of tread rubber covering the fabric can wear through in a couple of miles, and a tyre tread that looks fine at the start of a ride may not last to the end.

There are better indicators of the tyre's imminent demise. Towards the end of its life, the tread cap will wear to a wide flat in the centre, with a palpable variation in tread thickness across the tyre. The presence of this flat area doesn't quite answer the question, since many of us will happily continue riding on a tyre others will long ago have consigned to the bin. Simply feeling the rubber does not tell you how near it is to needing replacement.

A more useful yardstick is an increased incidence of punctures as the tread wears thin. Since this is likely to worsen, it's a good time to fit a new tyre. But essentially, this is a judgement call.

If you consistently ride the same tyre brand and model, then why not measure the thickness of a tyre (or the width of the flat on the tread, which is easier) at the moment you decide to discard it and replace the next one when worn to the same degree? That assumes, of course, that you are happy you chose the right moment to replace the first one.  
Richard Hallett

**Technical CENTAUR TO MOUNTAIN GOAT**

**Q** I'm currently running a Centaur 50-40-30 front chainset on my Roberts Audax bike, with 12-28 at the rear. I want lower gears. My understanding is that I can't do anything significant with the cassette, so I would replace the existing inner ring at the front with a smaller one. Can I fit a

smaller TA (or other non-Campy) ring in place of the 30 – for example, 26 or 24? Will the existing changer work okay? Will this give me a worthwhile improvement in gearing?  
aoxomoxoa, via the Cycling UK Forum

**A** If your chainset will accept a 24t inner ring (it will need a 74mm innermost bolt circle diameter, which is usual for road triples), this will lower small-ring gearing by 20%; a 26t ring will lower it by around 15%, or enough for a useful reduction in your lowest gears. The rear mech may not be able to take up chain slack in all ratios, but you can avoid problems with this by staying out of the smallest rear sprockets when on the inner chainring. Chainrings by TA and Stronglight are readily available with a BCD of 74mm.  
Richard Hallett

TA chainring with 26 teeth & 74mm BCD



**Technical JOCKEYING FOR POSITION**

**Q** I'm planning ahead for a job I need to do soon: replacing the rear derailer jockey wheels. Before I pop the packet open, is it clear which jockey wheel goes where? They are often subtly different, aren't they?  
Sweep, via the Cycling UK Forum

**A** As a general rule, if the jockey wheels differ and there is no diagram showing which is which, the one with a little sideways play goes at the top, nearest the cassette.  
Richard Hallett

**Contact the experts**

Email your technical, health, legal, or policy questions to [cycle@jamespembrokemedia.co.uk](mailto:cycle@jamespembrokemedia.co.uk) or write to **Cycle Q&A, PO Box 313, Scarborough, YO12 6WZ**. We regret that Cycle magazine cannot answer unpublished queries. But don't forget that Cycling UK operates a free-to-members advice line for personal injury claims, tel: **0844 736 8452**.