

Bout time to do some wheel bearing maintenance?

Looking after your bearings and doing some regular wheel bearing maintenance can save you a lot of hassle and money down the track. Regular washing and muddy riding conditions can allow dirt and grit into your bearings, try pricing a full set of bearings for your swingarm and you'll soon agree it's worth your time to do some regular bearing maintenance.

Wheel Bearing Maintenance

The easiest way to check your wheel bearings is to have your bike standing upright on both wheels and give the wheel a wobble from side to side. You'll feel if there is any play in the bearing.

If the bearings need replacing place the wheel on something that will allow you to have some space under and around the hub. Sitting the wheel on a rubbish bin or one of those nice alloy wheel changing stands will work fine. With a large flat blade screwdriver or something similar, gently prise the rubber dust seal out of the hub. It is possible to re-use these seals but they don't cost much so it's a good idea while you're doing your wheel bearing maintenance to also replace the seals.

With the seal removed flip the wheel over and remove the seal from the other side. You should now be able to get the screwdriver or a pin punch or drift down the centre of the hub to the inner race of the bottom bearing. Check that the bearing isn't held in by a circlip as is the case with some bikes.

With a hammer, tap the punch against the edge of the bearing so that the bearing will start to slide out of the hub.

If you can't get the punch against the edge of the bearing race turn the wheel over and give the opposite side bearing a sharp hit. Hopefully the shock will move the spacer tube against the bearing that you want to remove. Now that the spacer tube is loose, slide it over slightly to expose the edge of the bearing race. It'll make sense when you try to do it. Move the punch around the bearing as you hit it so that the bearing slides out evenly.

Once you've tapped the bearing right out remove the spacer tube that was in between the two bearings in the centre of the hub. It will now be easier to tap the other bearing out without the spacer tube getting in the way.

Give the hub a wipe and make sure it's clean. If your new bearings aren't of the sealed type then make sure they are well packed with grease. The best way to do this is to place a wad of grease in the palm of your hand and wipe the bearing across it so that the grease is forced into the bearing. You will see the grease ooze up out of the top of the bearing when it's full.

If possible use sealed bearings, they last longer and make wheel bearing maintenance less of a chore.

Find a socket or something similar that is about the same diameter as the outer race of the bearing. Sit the bearing on the hub and using the socket, evenly tap the bearing in. You'll hear the sound change and also feel when the bearing is seated.

Flip the wheel over and put the axle spacer tube back in and repeat the process for the bearing on that side. It's a good idea just before you tap the second bearing all the way home to slide the axle in to line up the spacer tube. To fit the dust seals again find a socket that is the right diameter and gently tap the dust seals into place.

Headstem Bearings

Once you've finished your wheel bearing maintenance it's time to do some bearing maintenance on your headstem.

Headstem bearings are very similar to wheel bearings to remove or service. Take the fork legs out of the triple clamps and undo the large flat nut on the top triple clamp. The triple clamp should lift off and you'll be able to slide the bottom triple clamp and shaft out of the headstem. You can now tap the outer races out of the headstem in the same manner as you would tap out wheel bearings.

The bottom bearing can be difficult to remove from the steering shaft, the shaft either has to be pressed out of the bottom triple clamp or you can chisel the bearing off the shaft with a cold chisel. I wouldn't recommend this as you can damage the surface of the shaft. It's probably best to take the triple clamp, shaft and new bearing to your local bike shop and get them to fit the bearing.

With your new bottom bearing fitted it's as simple of fitting the new outer races to the headstem tube and then sliding the bottom triple clamp and shaft up into the headstem. Place the top bearing over the shaft and put the top triple clamp back on. Lightly do up the top nut and put your fork legs back in but only tighten the bottom clamps. Once the bottom clamps are tightened then tighten the top nut until the steering moves freely. Once this is done then do up the top clamps. Refer to your workshop manual for correct torques for the nuts.

Swingarm Bearings

Time to do some bearing maintenance on your swingarm. Remove the seat and rear subframe from your bike. Take the rear brake caliper and swing it out of the way. Firstly, loosen all the bolts in the swingarm linkages with the everything still attached to make it easier to undo when you have the swingarm off the bike. Undo the nut on the end of the main pivot shaft that holds the swingarm to the bike and using a rod, tap it out of the frame. Undo the bolt that mounts the bottom of the shocker to the swingarm and remove it also.

You should now be able to just slide the swingarm out of the pivot point. With the swingarm on your bench, disassemble each bearing one at a time so you don't get parts mixed up. Some of the bearings will have a cap either side, gently prise these out with a screwdriver. You can now push out the inner bush and expose the bearing rollers. Clean the bearings thoroughly and inspect for wear, also inspect the dust seals. Replace as required.

Be aware that some of these bearings don't have a cage as such that holds the rollers so they will fall out and are easy to lose. When re-assembling the bearings it helps to put grease in the outer race (which you should be doing anyway) and use the grease to hold the rollers in place until you can get the inner bush in place.

With all the bearings repacked apply a smear of grease to the bolts as you put it all back together. Again check your workshop manual for the correct torque settings for all the bolts and nuts.

Also have a look at the top and bottom bearings for your shock absorber and give them a clean and repack too.

Just one final note on bearing maintenance, if possible buy your replacement bearings from a bearing shop. Take note of the numbers stamped on the bearing race. I've found that genuine bearings bought from the bike manufacturer are a lot more expensive than buying them from the bearing shop and in a lot of cases are exactly the same bearing anyway.

You may not always be able to do this, some headstem bearings for example are made under licence for the bike manufacturer and you can only purchase these from the bike manufacturer themselves but for wheel bearing maintenance most times you can purchase the same bearing from a bearing supplier. There you have it, wheel bearing maintenance and swingarm bearing maintenance for dummies, it really does pay to keep on top of it, your bike will handle well and hopefully you'll save a few bucks.