

## Fitting a saddle - why it's so important?



**It is not easy for a horse owner, who has not been specifically trained, to make sure that his or her horse's saddle fits properly or to more than suspect that it is causing trouble.**

### What problems can a poorly fitting saddle cause?

#### Common history patterns

Some types of horse, eg those with 'high' withers or marked muscle wastage, those which are 'broad' and those which are 'short coupled', are more likely to suffer saddle fitting problems than others. However, many owners are unaware of the relatively short time it can take for a horse to change shape, ie condition, sufficiently to cause discomfort and even pain from a saddle which has fitted well in the past. They may also be unaware of the difference in expertise available from a fully qualified Master Saddler and a qualified Saddle Fitter in comparison with those in the trade who are not so trained and qualified.

The following are some of the most common history details in horses whose problems may be associated with an ill-fitting saddle:

- Saddle not fitted by a professional at the outset.
- The new saddle was fitted more than three months ago.
- Saddle, horse and rider have not been seen by a qualified Saddler for over three months.
- Saddle 'belongs' to the owner/rider and not the horse.
- Horse has been rested for more than four weeks.
- Work has recently increased since the last fitting.
- A new type of athletic work has been started, eg jumping, etc.
- Horse has been lunged, especially if on one 'rein'.
- The rider's 'seat' may have been altered since taking up lessons, particularly if not from a trained instructor.
- A thicker numnah has been used over the last three weeks.

One common denominator is often a change in pressure under the saddle area either from changes in the horses condition, or from changes in the rider's position and demands for outline, with subsequent change in their developed contour.

A qualified Saddle Fitter will request information from your veterinary surgeon:

- Does your horse have any primary physical problems that could have predisposed to an unbalanced fit?
- Is there existing evidence of current damage to the horse's back, possibly by this saddle or by other medical/surgical reasons?

He/she will also request information from your riding instructor:

- Are there unbalancing faults in the rider's position or in the riding?

#### Effects of an ill-fitting saddle

Possible ill-effects of incorrect saddle fit may be immediately clinical, such signs should not be missed by a competent/observant rider; such are usually physical. Some are slower in onset and not so readily recognisable.

Your horse may adjust to any discomfort and may of course be the primary cause through its own developing asymmetry. The signs may be, eg:

- Subtle changes in its 'way of going'/action.
- There is often an associated or even an earlier appearance of muscle wastage - NOT just under the saddle.
- More obvious changes may arise, eg behavioural.

To determine if the saddle fit is involved in the above signs then exercise tests should be done. Ask a competent and capable rider to ride your horse bare back in walk and trot; then under saddle with NO numnah; then in its usual full tack; finally by the usual rider in its full tack.

If the horse goes significantly better bare back, there is good evidence that the saddle was likely to have been the problem, always assuming that there is no ill-fit with the bridle, bit or the numnah. If the horse reverts to 'being wrong' with the usual rider, then the rider becomes a suspect.

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### Physical signs

Where pressures or traumas have been inflicted:

- White hairs around saddle region.
- Lumps, bumps and abrasions in the saddle/girth area. Lumps and bumps may not appear until 20 minutes or so following un-tacking. Most subside within 12 hours and will of course recur if attention is not paid.
- Stiffness over the back, as judged by action or by manual induction, which is much slower to resolve spontaneously.

Behavioural signs:

- Objection to being tacked up, especially of being girthed.
- Marked 'cold back'.
- Marked, even sudden, 'humping' (beware the girth pinching).
- Objection to being ridden away.
- Bucking - with head and neck elevated.
- Baulking or refusing transitions, collection, jumps.
- Swishing tail from clamped down position, grinding teeth, shaking head sideways, general tenseness.
- Disliking grooming over the back.
- Other immediately inexplicable behavioural changes.

A correctly fitting saddle is important for:

- Effective and safe riding
- Progression in training
- Basic balance and impulsion
- General welfare

If a saddle does not fit correctly it is possible that the rider will experience a variety of problems, these will, however, resolve when the saddle is expertly altered. This can mean re-flocking to compensate for any unequal panels or unevenness (asymmetry) in the condition of the horse or for any lumps and bumps in or under the skin. Whatever the cause, it should be recognised and quickly put right before injury or behavioural changes occur. Any corrected or new saddle should be 'worked-in' to settle the flocking over 3 months and then re-checked. Repair, alteration or buying a new piece of tack requires expert opinion, ideally from a Society of Master Saddlers qualified Saddler or Saddle Fitter.

### How can I check if my horse's saddle is sound?

- Make sure that the saddle you are using is in good condition and 'sound'. You should check your saddle regularly. This covers a wide range of features, including the state of the leather and stitching, as well as:
- **Twisted Saddle:** this could be a distortion of the actual tree or of the panels to give a twisted appearance from the underside.
- **Broken Tree:** usually but not always one sided through the front arch caused by either a loosening/breakage of the rivets, the waist area or cantle mould. BOTH ARE RARE.

An accurate and safe diagnosis requires a professional decision usually after the saddle has been stripped down. Suspicion on your part may be partially resolved by doing the following:

- Either: place the saddle on a table and view it from the front and from the back, if one side looks higher than the other it is possible that the tree is twisted.
- Or: rest the pommel of the saddle on your stomach and pull back on the cantle with both hands. Turn the saddle the other way round, push both sides of the pommel downwards together then pull both sides away from each other. If, on either of these tests, there is excessive movement or metallic sounds, then the tree is likely to be damaged.

All or any of these will distort the panels and may excessively slacken the underlying webbing of the seat allowing pressure on the spine at the pommel either on top or on either side of the wither.

### How can I check if my horse's saddle fits correctly?

If you are confident that the saddle is 'sound', then further assessment of 'fit' can follow:

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- Put your horse's bridle on and lead it in hand at walk then trot on a hard, level surface, turning in both directions (ensure the area is safe and free of distractions).
- Make a note of the horse's action - using a video camera could be helpful.
- Now place the saddle on your horse without a numnah and slide the saddle into its usual position. Check that it sits level and square over the upper rib cage and that the panels are not bearing on the loins. It should be evenly in contact along the 'back' with a clearance through the gullet. Ensure the arch points do not pinch the withers or sit away from them. The shoulder, especially the points, should not be restricted by the saddle.
- Girth up the saddle and ask someone to mount. Check that there is still clearance along the gullet, especially at the pommel, at halt, walk and with rider standing in the stirrups. Repeat the walk, trot and turning in both directions.
- Compare this action with the in-hand action and look for evidence of swinging, rocking, slippage to either side, forwards or backwards of the saddle.
- Check for signs of altered 'way of going' especially restriction from the shoulder and general discomfort.
- If you notice major differences, it is possible that the saddle does not fit correctly. If there are no changes, observe the horse at canter in a large circle on both reins, look for any of the above signs plus any unbalanced action in the horse, rider or for any other discrepancies.

Contact the Society of Master Saddlers' to find a qualified Master Saddler or Saddle Fitter in your area - Tel: 01449 711642; Email: [enquiries@mastersaddlers.co.uk](mailto:enquiries@mastersaddlers.co.uk); Website: [www.mastersaddlers.co.uk](http://www.mastersaddlers.co.uk).

### References

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- **Joyce Harman DVM MRCVS**, Harman Equine Clinic, Washington, Virginia, USA.
- **Dr M D Marsden**, Department of Veterinary Clinical Studies, Royal (Dick) School of Veterinary Studies, University of Edinburgh, Summerhall, Edinburgh EH9 1QH, UK.

**If you want any other information on health issues concerning your horse please contact Hampden Veterinary Hospital on 01296 423666 and we will be happy to advise you.**