

Saddle Fitting

Choosing a saddle is an important decision and the most important factor is that it should fit both you and your horse correctly. Anyone who has suffered back problems knows how painful and debilitating they can be and a badly made or fitting saddle can cause serious problems for both horse and rider.

The Society of Master Saddlers has worked hard to improve saddle fitting standards including instituting what remains the only non-commercially linked saddle fitting qualification in the world. The qualification has been approved by City & Guilds/NPTC, a UK qualification awarding body, and is recognised by equine vets and physiotherapists and other professionals working in the equestrian industry.



The Society has played a major role in educating horse owners and riders about the importance of correctly fitting saddles and it is now generally appreciated that the saddle – and the way it fits – is fundamentally important to the welfare, comfort and success of horse and rider. There is also now far greater understanding of why - and how - horses ‘change shape’, which often means that a saddle that was an acceptable fit when it was purchased may require adjustment – and in rare cases, even exchange – at a later date.

It is better to have regular checks than wait for problems to develop and many horse owners and riders now have the fit of their saddles checked regularly.

20 Things You Need to Know about Saddles

1. Your saddle, new or second-hand, should be fitted by a Member of the Society of Master Saddlers who will advise you regarding the best make and model for your horse.
2. If you use a numnah or gel pad tell the saddle fitter before the saddle is fitted.
3. Each horse should have its own saddle. Just as a pair of shoes adapts to the wearer’s foot, so the saddle adopts the contours of the horse.
4. It may be possible to adjust your existing saddle to fit your new horse - but the advice of a qualified saddle fitter should always be sought.
5. Your horse changes shape regularly according to his age, training, management etc. Have your saddle checked - and any necessary adjustments made - regularly.
6. Look after your saddle carefully. If insufficiently treated the leather will dry out but if you overload it with products they will not be absorbed and the saddle will be sticky - possibly marking your clothes, or worse, causing the saddle

stitching to rot. The regularity with which the saddle requires oiling relates to usage, weather conditions and so on.

7. The young horse must be fitted especially carefully to avoid any damage that may cause problems later in life. The young back is particularly vulnerable and even if being lunged without a rider a swinging/bouncing saddle that doesn't fit - and may even be damaged - can be the cause of veterinary problems that may be irreversible. Some young horses develop at a substantial rate and the saddle that fitted well only a short time previously may soon need adjustment.
8. The standard general-purpose saddle is a compromise and can never fulfil the needs of individual disciplines as well as saddles designed specifically.
9. Any unlevelness in your horse's gait - especially behind - can cause the saddle to move/gyrate and possibly exacerbate the problem.
10. Mounting from a mounting block is better for the horse's back and guards against the saddle tree becoming twisted.
11. When mounting the rider's weight should always be lowered gently into the saddle - never 'thump' or 'bang'.
12. If you have to mount from the ground be aware that the stirrup leathers should be changed from side to side regularly to avoid the near-side leather becoming longer/stretched.
13. Saddles should be carefully stored on a well-made saddle horse or rack. Lifting a saddle onto a very high rack can damage your own back - and often results in the saddle being stored crookedly.
14. Great attention must always be paid to the condition of the saddle flocking (stuffing). Irregular/uneven/lumpy flocking can cause pressure points that may seriously damage the horse's back. Correct flocking provides a cushioning effect that helps to reduce trauma. Over stuffed, the saddle will be hard, will not adapt to the horse's back and may cause pressure sores or sensitivity.
15. The saddle must always be level when viewed from the side. Anything else compromises the horse's comfort and welfare and will affect the rider's position in the saddle.
16. When viewed from the front and rear the saddle gullet must always provide adequate clearance of the horse's spine - both before and after the horse is exercised.
17. Most equine insurance policies can be extended to include theft of tack and some policies even include cover for accidental damage.
18. It is important to ask the saddler to check the saddle when a horse falls. 'Hidden' damage may be substantial and broken/cracked trees can be difficult to detect. If the saddle falls from the saddle rack or is dropped it should also be checked over by a qualified saddler.
19. The size of the stirrup irons should be checked when a different rider exercises the horse. Irons that are either too small or too large can be the cause of serious accidents.



20. Weak or defective stitching on any part of the saddle should be repaired instantly. Saddles should be checked every time they are used; equal attention should be paid to girths and leathers.

A DVD and booklet providing advice for horse owners considering purchasing a saddle is available from the Society of Master Saddlers. For further information and details of qualified saddle fitters in your area visit their website at www.mastersaddlers.co.uk.

