

Does My Saddle Fit?

Tips To Tell If It's Right For Your Horse

By Charlene Blundell

How can you tell if your saddle fits you and fits your horse? How do you know if your saddle is comfortable for your horse?

Here are some signs to look for in determining whether your saddle you fits properly. Does your horse:

React to having the saddle placed on his back?

Kick out or pin his ears when being girthed?

Have trouble lifting his back when ridden, or go around with a hollow back with head in the air?

Have trouble changing leads or cantering in one direction?

Have white patches of hair on the withers or on other places that lie under the saddle (that are not part of his natural hair color)?

Have raised welts or bumps on his back that don't go away?

Have flat spots along his top line that could indicate muscle atrophy?

Regularly buck when you are riding?

Any of these can be signs of a poor saddle-fit. Although there could be many other causes of such problems, it's never a bad idea to eliminate saddle-fit.

The first thing to check is the wither clearance. The basic rule of thumb is three fingers of clearance at the pommel, and at least two fingers on the sides of the wither above the panel.

If the clearance is not adequate, it can indicate the saddle tree is too wide for your horse and causing pressure at the tree points. If this is the case, the saddle may even rise up in the back and bounce up and down when you ride. Putting a riser pad at the back of the saddle is not the answer to this problem and can actually be counter-productive to producing better fit, causing you to pitch forward and throw your legs forward to try to balance.

If there is too much clearance at the pommel, the saddle tree may be pinching the horse and causing the saddle to be too high in the front. This imbalance may make you to fight to sit upright as the improper balance of your saddle will be causing you to fall back and bring your knees forward.

Is your saddle panel making contact along the entire length of the panel, or is it gaping in the center or at the back?

If your saddle is not making good contact with your horse's back it may be putting uneven pressure on one point or another. This pressure point can become a location where the muscle atrophies. Maintaining even pressure distribution along the panel is critical for your horse's back to stay healthy and develop properly.

Additionally, your saddle placement is critical to your horse's comfort. Your saddle needs to be two fingers or about two inches behind the edge of your horse's scapula (the scapula location can vary from side to side on your horse so place your saddle behind the scapula that is farthest back, usually the left).

If you have a wool flocked saddle, you may need to have it spot flocked or completely re-flocked. Have your saddle checked every six months to a year. If you have a new saddle, the flock will settle quickly. Do not postpone your first saddle check after purchase of a new saddle more than six months because this can be a period of significant change in the fit.

Your saddle must fit properly to be safe and comfortable for you as well as the horse. If the saddle is too small, you will post off the cantle and cause a lot of percussion on your horse's back. If the saddle is too big, it will not give you a proper place to sit.

Saddle size can vary from brand to brand. Do not get hung up on the size of your saddle. Buy a saddle that fits you and your horse. A good saddle fitter can help you determine if your saddle fits correctly and is helping your horse -- and you -- to be your best, and be a guide to purchasing the right saddle, whether it is new or used.