A well-fitting saddle will distribute the rider's weight evenly

Back protector

Protect your horse from back pain by ensuring his saddle fits correctly. Equine vet **Colin Mitchell** offers advice on avoiding problems to keep your horse comfortable

OUR EXPERT
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B ack pain from an ill-fitting saddle is a common problem in many ridden horses, but sadly can go unnoticed. In most cases, it is entirely preventable. One of the key things to remember is that a horse or pony will change shape depending on the seasons, or the amount of work they are doing. Therefore, a saddle fitted in the winter may not fit so well for competing in the summer.

The purpose of a saddle is, quite simply, to evenly distribute the rider's weight across the areas of the horse's back that are able to support weight.

Saddles can be made of leather or synthetic materials and come in different shapes, depending on the discipline you are doing.

But whatever saddle you choose, it is vitally important it fits both horse and rider.

The saddle should not exert any pressure on the spine in the midline of the horse's back and should spread weight evenly over the muscles on either side of the back.
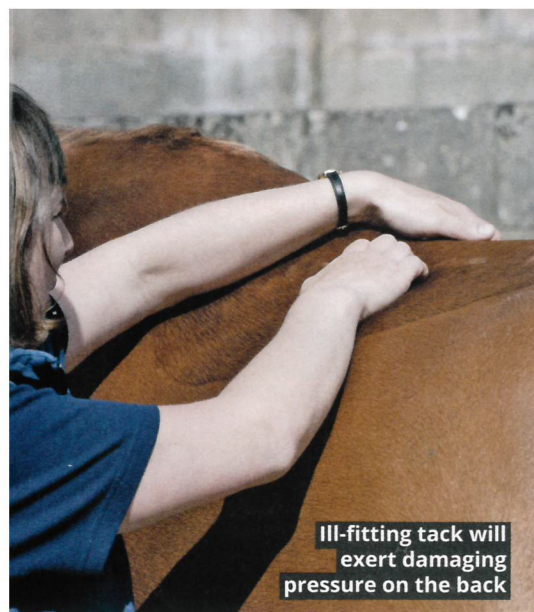
It must fit comfortably at the wither/shoulder area and rest in contact with the back through the entire length of the saddle.

If the saddle pinches at the shoulder, it can restrict forelimb action. ▶

As the seasons change, so may the shape of your horse's back

Ill-fitting tack will exert damaging pressure on the back

Any ill-fitting area of the saddle will cause focal pressure on the horse's back. This may take the form of a few broken hairs, a hairless patch, damaged skin and bleeding.

If pressure is exerted over a larger area it can cause muscle pain.

Imagine walking a long distance while carrying a back pack – this should help you understand the importance of a good fit and evenly distributed weight.

Primary and secondary pain

The investigation of back pain is a common scenario for most equine vets. It will begin with a detailed list of questions to establish a basic background of when the problem started, what signs are shown and what tack is used.

Most back pain is likely to be slow or gradual in its onset, so it may be difficult to pinpoint any single incident – for example, a fall at a fence – which then subsequently caused the problem.

The signs may be subtle, such as difficulties with transitions, or reduced jumping ability.

More severe cases may show resentment when saddling, girthing, mounting and the horse could make attempts to throw the rider off. These are signs which are often mistaken for bad behaviour.

The vet will examine the horse with the aim of identifying any disease which may lead to back pain. This is known as secondary back pain.

For example, skin problems over the saddle area, a lameness issue or dental disease may actually manifest as back pain.

This is usually because the horse is moving differently to avoid causing pain in another area. With time, this altered movement leads to discomfort in the back.

So, although back pain is present, it is not the primary problem and will usually resolve with treatment once the primary issue is addressed.

Back pain can also be primary, where there are no other significant sites of disease.

Examples of primary back pain include over-riding dorsal spinous processes (kissing spines), facet joint pain (facet joints make the spine flexible), fractured bones and ligament strains.

The veterinary examination may include trotting up and lungeing on firm and soft surfaces, possibly with a saddle on. If it is safe to do so, the horse may be assessed when ridden, perhaps by the owner and another rider, such as a veterinary nurse or instructor.

It is not uncommon for lameness to cause back pain, but much less common for back pain to cause lameness.

If primary back pain is suspected, radiography (X-Rays) and an ultrasound scan of the back may be performed.

X-rays are helpful in assessing the bones of the back, and an ultrasound scan images the soft tissues, ligaments and muscles as well as the surface of the bones and some joints.

TIP from the TOP

Word of mouth can often be an effective way of finding a reputable saddle fitter. Ask your friends and instructor who they use.

Treatment plan

My first line of approach to a horse with back pain, in the absence of lameness, would be to perform a detailed dental examination under sedation and recommend a saddle fit check and a session with an ACPAT (Association of Chartered Physiotherapists in Animal Therapy) physiotherapist.

These three steps will often resolve minor back pain issues in the majority of horses.

Preventing back problems

Prevention of back pain probably does not receive the attention it should. The following

A qualified saddle fitter has at least three years' experience

Have your horse's saddle fit checked at least twice a year

> **"It is not uncommon for lameness to cause back pain, but much less common for back pain to cause lameness"**

will help to keep your horse healthy and pain free:-
● Book a six-monthly assessment with a qualified physiotherapist;
● Have your horse's saddle fit checked at least twice a year. He will change shape depending on the season and if he puts on or loses weight and muscle tone;
● Have an annual dental examination conducted by an equine vet or qualified equine dental technician;
● Keep yourself as fit as possible, so you ride more effectively. The importance of rider positioning, balance, weight and competence cannot be over-emphasised. It is an unpalatable truth, but an overweight, unfit and unbalanced rider can cause back pain in a horse, even if the saddle is a perfect fit;
● Always use a mounting block to avoid potential strain on the horse's back;
● Perform an adequate warm-up prior to working the horse and a cool down period;
● Brush your horse's back and clean the underside of your saddle – a dirty saddle on muddy hair will lead to skin disease and a sore back;
● Ask your instructor to watch the saddle as you ride. Is it moving, twisting or slipping?

When you remove your horse's saddle after a hack, schooling session or competition, carefully look at his back. Check for any:-
● Broken hairs;
● Rub marks;
● Patches of sweat;
● Muscle tenderness.

Any of the above may indicate a saddle problem and you should seek expert advice. ■

Remove any dirt that could cause rubbing to occur