



Undiagnosed lameness

It's a common complaint, but in many cases, the culprit is poor saddle fit and balance.

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With complex physiological issues, veterinarians may recommend treatments to alleviate symptoms. The horse benefits greatly when the health care team works together, combining knowledge to understand underlying factors. This series will discuss concepts to assist professionals in the diagnostic process.

A common equine injury is to the suspensory ligaments, caused by poor (or incorrect) riding. Classical principles of dressage training and movement are being replaced by flashiness, hyperflexion and the "show trot". When a horse is ridden in a flashy trot, his back is pushed down, the saddle balance falls too far back, and the rider sits behind the centre of gravity, causing excessive pressure over the last floating ribs.

This causes a chain reaction: the saddle stuffing compresses in the rear, the rider collapses into a chair seat, and the excess pressure on the horse's sacroiliac joint makes it nearly impossible for him to engage from behind, stepping under himself correctly. At least eight contributors affect the horse's centre of gravity, which in turn affects the balance of the saddle and rider.

The saddle's purpose is to distribute the rider's weight evenly over the saddle support area, while balancing the rider over the horse's centre of gravity. The horse is more comfortable in a well-balanced saddle because the rider's weight is distributed over a larger surface area. The saddle must not be driven into the shoulder, or back on the loin. In a balanced saddle, the rider uses the four curves in her back as natural "shock absorbers", sits balanced on the seat bones, and is able to lean forward and backward without swinging the legs.



When the saddle is too high in front – off the withers – or too low in the back, this causes excess uneven pressure on the horse's loins. He will be unable to come through with his back and step underneath himself into a correctly engaged frame. The rider will struggle with position or feel tipped back. If the saddle is too low in front it will pinch the horse's shoulder, restrict movement, causing discomfort (saddle may be too wide in the front or too high in the back), forcing the rider into an unnatural position potentially straining discs in her lower back. **IVC**

Signs of poor saddle fit

- Base of neck pushed down
- Incorrect bend, curling or twisting in neck
- Tail hanging crooked or "pinched-in"
- Hollow back
- Whites of eyes showing
- Excessive chomping at bit when ridden
- Ears laid back
- Tongue busyness
- Stumbling or tripping
- Four-beat canter or pace
- Bucking or rearing
- Resistance to go forward
- Refusals
- Girthiness



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