

# Q • How can I tell if my horse is in pain because of the saddle?

By Jochen Schleese, CMS, CSFT, CSE

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# A:

The physical signs of saddle fit trauma are more easily apparent than the psychological signs. Signs that your horse is in pain include head tossing, bucking, stumbling, tongue issues, rearing, and resistance. White hair, dry spots, and muscle atrophy are also visual effects resulting from poor saddle fit.

Each of these manifestations has as its origin an issue in a saddle that has not been fitted properly to the horse – either the gullet channel is too narrow, the tree points and gullet plate are not roomy enough at the withers, and the angle of the tree at the gullet does not match the shoulder angle, allowing it to pass through clearly (like a sliding door). Spinal issues, nerve damage, or cartilage injuries are all results of poorly fitting saddles that may take months or years to appear. The horse may be ‘girthy’, anticipating the saddle hurting once it’s girthed up.

Most people love their horses and would be distressed to learn that their saddles are causing these issues; horses do not consciously behave badly and really want nothing more than to be loved by the alpha (in this case, their rider). Horses value this bond between themselves and their riders, and don’t understand why this relationship is impacted by the saddle – which causes pain. As a rider, you intuitively know when something is wrong in your relationship; you see it in your horse’s eyes, you feel it when he doesn’t nicker or come to you freely when called. He is anticipating pain. When the horse expresses himself this extremely, you know that he has suffered for many days already.