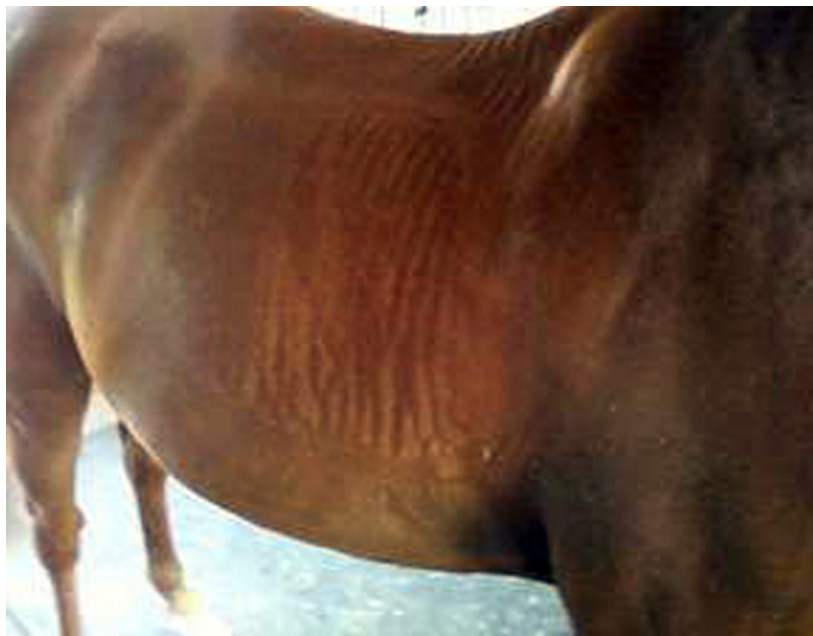


Saddle Fitting and Skin Issues

By Jochen Schleese, CMS, CSFT, CSE
©2016 Saddlefit 4 Life® All Rights Reserved

It's no secret that redheads have sensitive skin. But the interesting thing is that chestnuts also have the most sensitive skin in the horse world.



As everyone knows, the skin is the largest organ of the body. (Somehow this never seemed to make sense intuitively, because to me an organ is an organ, and skin is skin, but there you have it!) That's why creams are so readily absorbed into the blood stream and can quickly work how and where they're supposed to. The skin is also the first line of defense against painful pressure and the skin is subject to changes that can be assessed in the evaluation of pain.

It is known that the fascia of the thoracic region (the region where the saddle is placed also referred to as the saddle support area) is extremely sensitive to pressure and pain due to a richly innervated connective tissue web associated with the spinal cord. This is in contrast to the fascia overlying the lumbar region, which is generally more pliable and less sensitive to pain and to excessive pressure.

It is not always easy to assess the health of the skin of the thoracolumbar region. Healthy skin should be soft, contain adequate moisture and be freely movable from the underlying cutaneous muscles and be able to respond to stimuli. One can be readily fooled by horses that tend to respond less to stimuli and be convinced that those horses are not sore. However, most of those horses' fascia is less responsive because the horses are undermuscled and underweight, old and/or suffering from chronic diseases and degenerative conditions such as kissing spine or impingement of the dorsal spinous processes. In other words, the skin has become numb due to chronic pain. I have sometimes come across riders who don't want to let me assess their saddle fit until they have ridden for about 20 minutes – at which point

their horse's skin has become less sensitive and they can therefore 'prove' (and insist) that their saddle is not causing excess pressure.

Horses that suffer from chronic poor saddle fit usually have skin changes that lead to chronic skin dryness and nerve tissue atrophy with the resulting lack of response. It is unfortunate that these changes are the inevitable consequences of poor saddle fit because they make the detection of pain so much more difficult. As many horses suffer from poor saddle fit, most people are closeminded about the possibility of pain since the detection is not straightforward. It is my hope that through education more horse owners become more cognizant of the damage that inevitably occurs from chronic pressure.

Occasionally chestnuts can experience skin 'ripples' as in the picture above. They are not folds but sit up from the surface as if one had literally pinched them up.

These are often due to a saddle sliding forward, and as it does so it is literally taking the skin with it creating folds or wrinkles – this is most visible along the topline right behind the horse's withers for about 6 inches. If the horse is particularly sensitive

and thin skinned (as most chestnuts are), then it could also be triggering the thin muscle beneath the skin that quivers when a fly lands on it, and the constant irritation creates these wrinkles. As the horse sweats and then dries it could create wrinkles in the coat – this is fairly normal, but the ridges at the top look more like everything slid forward taking the top layer of the skin with it and sliding it over the muscles beneath.

This is what I suggest as a temporary alleviation of this issue until the saddle can be properly fitted.~ Perhaps some of you may be experiencing similar issues, and this could help you as well until a saddle fitter can refit the saddle:

- put a lift pad (or folded tea towel) under the saddle at the withers
- ride with a fleece pad directly on the horses back, then the lift pad, then a thin saddle pad, then the saddle
- cross the billets to avoid saddle slipping forward.

Please email me at Jochen@schleese.com if you have specific saddle fit issues or questions you would like to see addressed in future issues! Until then – happy riding!