

TOP 10 Signs of Poor Saddle Fit

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Saddle fitting is a truly comprehensive art and science that involves getting the fit right for both parts of the equation – horse and rider. This article will focus on saddle fit for the horse.

Here are ten signs of poor saddle fit resulting in issues that you should avoid if at all possible by having your saddle checked and adjusted regularly. Many of these issues are caused by a gullet plate that does not properly accommodate the angle and width of the shoulder and ends up pinching at the withers. The withers is where the stallion traditionally bites the mare during mating, which reflexively causes her to stand still, drop her back, and rotate her pelvis in preparation for mating. It actually causes the same instinctive reaction in geldings and is due to pressure on a reflex point resulting in behaviour the rider really doesn't want. The rider sits on top, urging the horse to move forward, when the horse's instinct is to stand still. Often the rider mistakenly believes their horse is stubborn and reluctant to move forward.

The gullet plate of the saddle should be positioned at the base of the withers on the trapezius muscle. If the gullet plate has not been adjusted to fit properly with two to three fingers' width all around the front of the pommel (not just at the top), and the tree points have not been fitted to match the necessary width and angle of the shoulder blade, the horse will often exhibit resistant behaviour.



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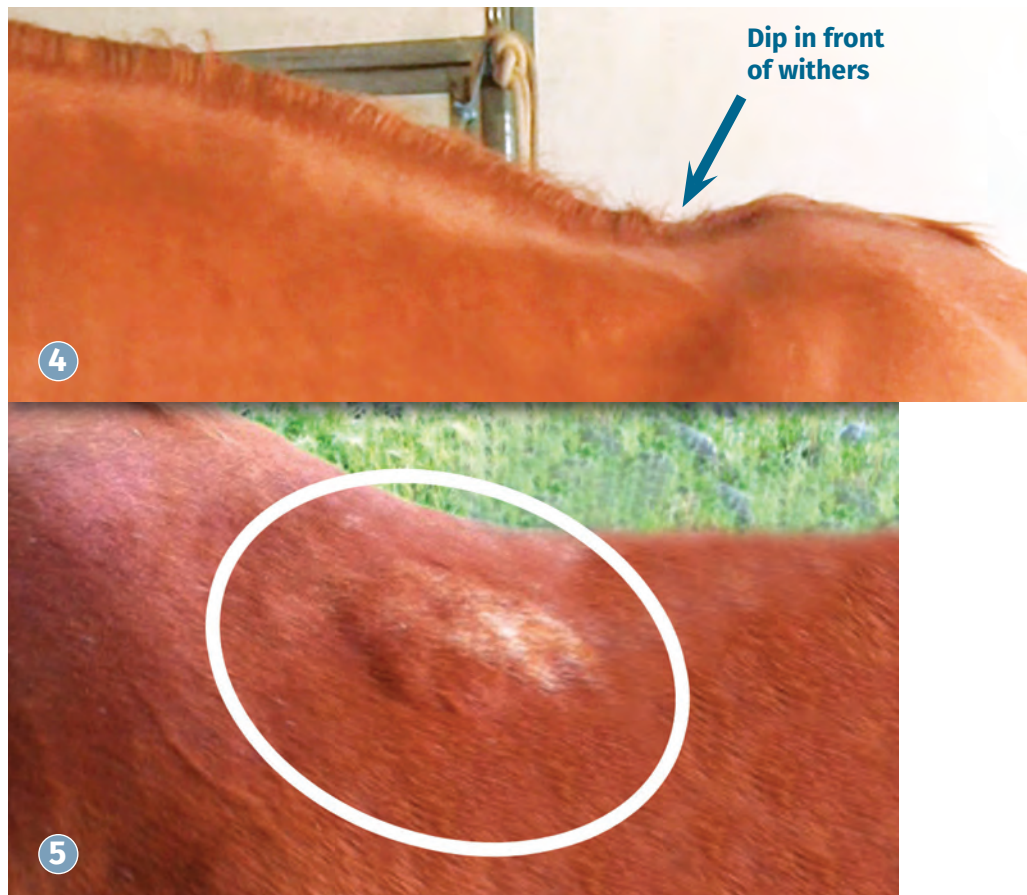
A gullet channel that is too narrow will impede expansion of the longissimus muscle, and hinder the horse's ability to move freely.

Iliocostalis

Longissimus

Multifidus Muscles

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2 Lameness in the front, if the insertion of longissimus is pinched at the withers.

The longissimus is the long back muscle, which we want to be smooth and supple in order to engage the back during movement. Again, if the insertion at the trapezius is impacted by a gullet that is too narrow, it will impact the ability of the horse to move freely and can cause lameness or tripping on the forehand.

3 Pinched withers causes twitching at the elbow.

This is a simple muscular reflex and is not consciously controlled by the horse; it is a reaction to the pressure of the gullet at the withers.

4 Muscle atrophy (visible dip) at the withers.

Muscle atrophy can occur when an

unbalanced saddle puts too much pressure on a particular area. The horse tries to avoid the pressure, goes into "defensive mode" by contracting the particular muscle and surrounding muscles, and can even alter his gaits. Under the point of pressure where circulation is impacted (thus reducing nutrients and oxygen to the affected area) the muscle will decline or atrophy.

5 Hair loss, blisters, inability to move the skin around in the saddle support area.

These issues often develop in the area of the withers, or along the spine where the gullet channel is too narrow for the horse's back. Hair loss can result in white hair growing back. Fluid bumps can develop when the horse is ridden hollow and the transverse processes of the spine

1 Tightness of muscle at front edge of shoulder blade.

This is generally caused by a gullet plate that pinches at the withers on the trapezius muscle, causing the horse to consciously contract the muscle to avoid the pain.



The saddle should never lie on the vertebrae with their longer transverse processes.

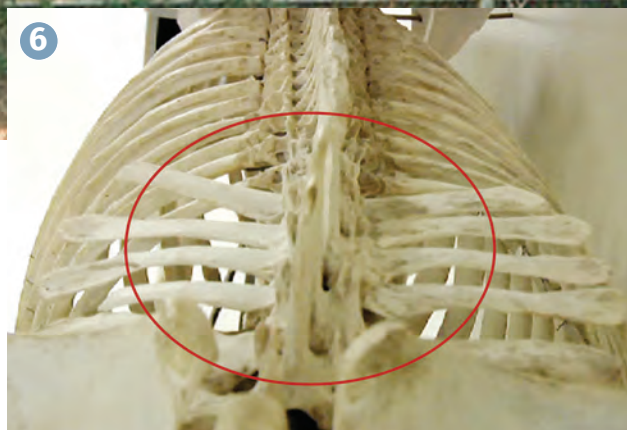
touch each other or rub (as in kissing spine), or the withers are not in alignment with the spine. Fluid bumps can also develop when the ligaments have been injured previously from saddles with gullets that were too narrow.

6 Bucking reflex or hopping, triggered by a saddle that is too long.

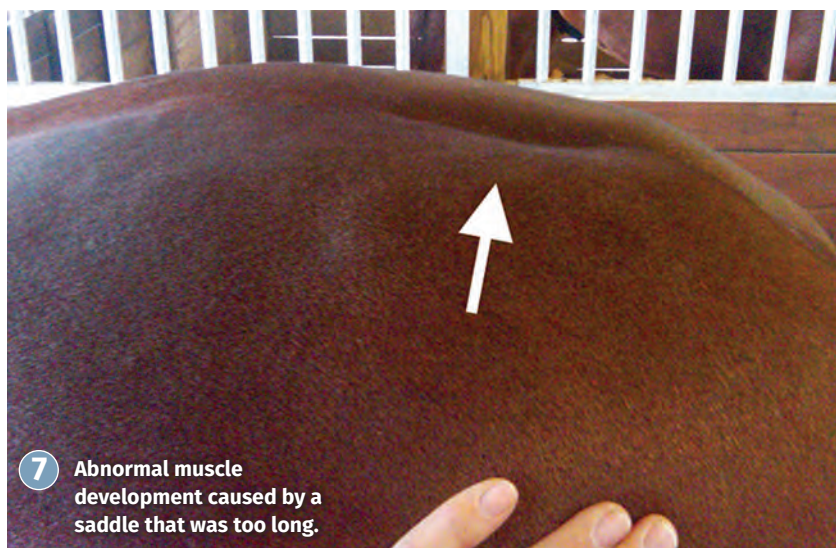
The saddle support area is between the base of the withers (usually where the mane ends) and the 18th thoracic vertebra. Past this vertebra are the lumbar vertebrae, upon which the saddle should not lie as this is where the so-called bucking reflex is located. We've all seen horses that react this way to a saddle that lies past the saddle support area. It's the horse's attempt to be rid of the irritant causing pain, which is why many saddles are then pushed forward through the motion of the horse itself.

7 Atrophy at the croup. Pressure on the spinal nerves causes one-sided development of the muscles as horse tries to avoid pain.

Atrophy will occur under severe instances of constant pressure, which will first damage the hair follicles resulting in hair loss and/or white hair. This can be reversed only when the cause is addressed (the pinching saddle), which will allow the muscle to regrow, although the white hairs remain. Muscle memory will help in the rebuilding of



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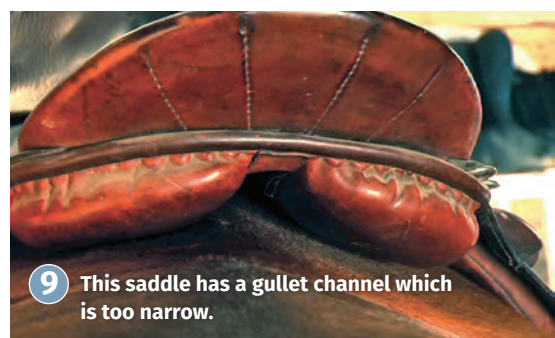
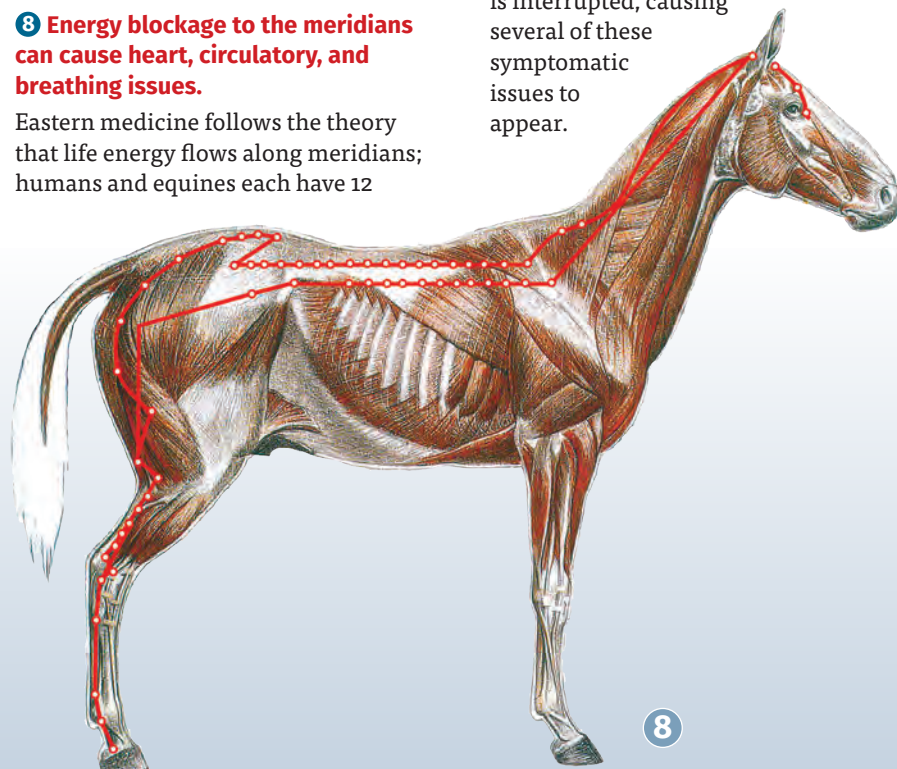
7 Abnormal muscle development caused by a saddle that was too long.

atrophied muscles if the muscles were properly trained. It will take significantly longer to build up untrained or incorrectly trained muscles.

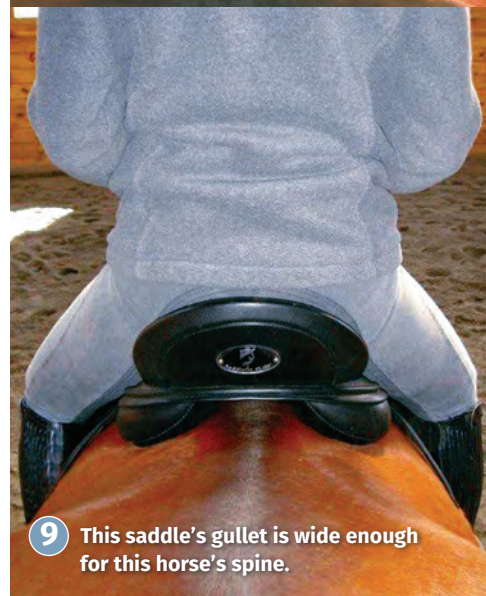
8 Energy blockage to the meridians can cause heart, circulatory, and breathing issues.

Eastern medicine follows the theory that life energy flows along meridians; humans and equines each have 12

meridians which can be influenced through acupuncture. When the saddle puts pressure on the meridians (the red lines in the diagram) the flow of energy is interrupted, causing several of these symptomatic issues to appear.



9 This saddle has a gullet channel which is too narrow.



9 This saddle's gullet is wide enough for this horse's spine.

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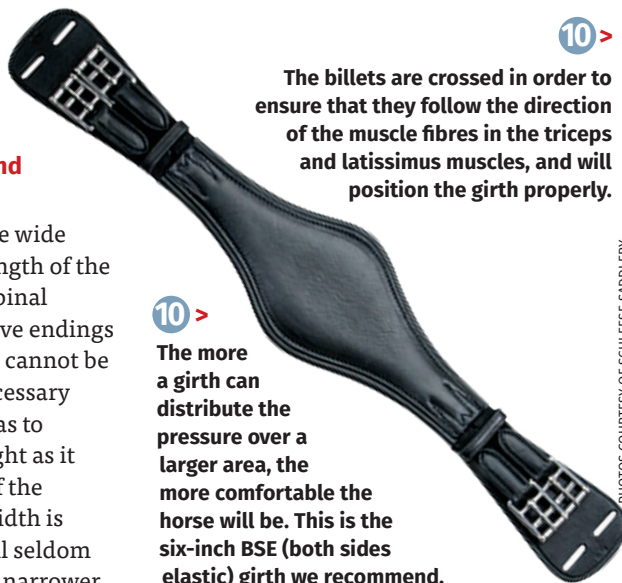
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9 Too narrow gullet channel impedes expansion of the longissimus; this can block the movement of the forehand and cause uneven sweating.

The gullet channel needs to be wide enough through the entire length of the saddle to accommodate the spinal processes, ligaments, and nerve endings from front to back. The width cannot be an arbitrary decision. The necessary weight bearing surface still has to accommodate the rider's weight as it relates to the conformation of the horse's back. The optimum width is between six and ten cm; it will seldom be wider and should never be narrower. Padding a too-narrow channel with extra padding in an attempt to fix it is like wearing another pair of socks when the shoes are already too small!

10 A pinching girth will shorten strides.

About 20 percent of instability issues arise from the girth. The girth should be narrowest at the spot where it sits under the elbow and between four and eight



10 > The more a girth can distribute the pressure over a larger area, the more comfortable the horse will be. This is the six-inch BSE (both sides elastic) girth we recommend.

inches wide at the sternum to displace the pressure as evenly as possible along its length. Girths that are too short and too narrow may actually cut into the pectoralis muscle. Wider is always better, but it should be narrow towards the ends and have elastic on both sides to allow the horse to breathe better.

10 > The billets are crossed in order to ensure that they follow the direction of the muscle fibres in the triceps and latissimus muscles, and will position the girth properly.

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Jochen Schlee, Certified Master Saddler, Equine Ergonomist, is a leader in the concept of saddle fit, and teaches his Saddlefit 4 Life® philosophy



worldwide. He is also the author of *Suffering in Silence, The Saddle-Fit Link to Physical and Psychological Trauma in Horses*.

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