



Do you have any hints to avoid the 'saddle fitting hell' *of buying a saddle?*

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A There is an art and a science to fitting a saddle to both horse and rider. Human and Equine anatomy are a key determinant in choosing the correct saddle. In a nutshell it has to work for both of you.

A badly fitting saddle not only causes discomfort to the horse and rider, but can actually stop a horse from moving properly. The tree and panels of a saddle should be chosen for the horse; the seat and flap length for the rider – at minimum.

The proper way to measure the seat size of an English saddle is diagonally from either saddle nail, on the side of the pommel, to the centre of the cantle. Adult seat sizes vary from 16" to 19". Try out several saddles to see which feels most comfortable, because even half an inch can make a difference. It's like buying shoes – you have to try them on and walk in them to see what actually fits.

Saddle trees can vary in width at the twist (where the tree is between the upper inner thighs), the deepest point, and in the

amount of seat foam, which is essentially the padding. When you have found a model which feels comfortable to you, take it to the horse to see how it fits on its back. It is important that the saddle feel comfortable and fit you correctly, because if not, your discomfort will translate down to the horse.

Panel length must take into consideration the length of the horse's saddle support area, never going past the 18th thoracic vertebrae.

Flap size and position are also important.

Correct positioning on the horse is vital. The saddle should be placed over the withers and then pushed back (to make sure the hairs are smoothed down). The tree points should be directly behind the shoulder blades. The centre of the saddle should lie horizontally to the ground to ensure proper positioning of the deepest point.





When viewed from behind it is easy to see if the saddle is straight. Most horses are muscled unevenly, and the padding of the saddle can be adjusted to accommodate this. There should be two to three fingers clearance all around the withers, since this space will be decreased with the weight of the rider and the pull of the girth. The saddle should at no point touch the backbone along its length. The gullet channel should be wide enough in order not to interfere with the spinal processes or the dorsal ligament system of the horse's back. Ensure no rocking or bridging.

The rider should then get on to see if his or her seated position is correct. Proper stuffing does not always mean more stuffing. A properly fitting saddle should only need a thin, quilted cotton pad to protect the leather.

Most new saddles are filled fairly loosely with a wool/synthetic mix, which takes about six months of regular riding to "break in". Foam and felt panels cannot be refitted – they either fit or they don't

and that's where pads will come in handy. What fits while the horse is standing still may not work once he starts moving. Unless the rider has a definite intent of specialization, a general purpose saddle is probably the best answer. Personal preferences, body size, and breed of horse should all be considered when buying a saddle.

Both you and your horse need to feel comfortable, be balanced, and perform optimally with the choice you make. It boils down to personal preference of what feels good for you and works for your horse.

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