

**What are the essentials of correctly fitted gear?**



The correct selection and fitting of gear is *very* important if you want your horse to be relaxed and to be able to work for you without being uncomfortable or in pain. A horse cannot work well in badly fitting gear in just the same way that you cannot walk in badly fitting shoes. Badly fitted gear rubs and causes sore areas - leading to discomfort or even strong pain in the horse; therefore poorly fitting gear can be the start of many physical *and* behavioural problems with horses. It is *very* common for horses to be blamed for 'bad behaviour' when in fact the poor horse is simple trying to avoid pain caused by poorly fitted gear.

An inexperienced owner/rider will need help when fitting new gear to a horse. Fitting gear, particularly a saddle, is difficult until a horse owner is experienced enough to know exactly what to look for therefore if you are unsure seek expert advice.

Physical signs that a horse is sore from poorly fitted gear include tender areas which will be felt when grooming the horse or will cause the horse to resist being saddled or ridden, through to actual open sores which obviously will lead to even more resistance on the part of the horse due to extreme pain.

In particular, the areas of the horse that are commonly affected by badly fitting gear are the mouth corners (due to problems with the bit), the base of the ears (due to problems with the browband), the front of the nose and the back of the jaw (due to problems with the noseband), the area behind the elbow (due to problems with the girth) and the back area due to problems with the saddle cloth and/or due to incorrect saddle fit.

Poorly fitting and inappropriate bits cause many problems with horses. The bit should have no sharp edges, should be the correct size for the horse and should be fitted at the correct height in the mouth. Bits vary enormously in type and severity. **Never** use a bit without fully understanding how it works and why



In this photograph the bit is in an ideal position, not too high or too low in the mouth. The noseband is not too tight and sits well below the protruding check bone (arrow).

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you are using it, many bits are very severe and should not be used by an inexperienced horse person – at the same time knowledgeable horse people usually realise that severe bits are often counter productive and do not use them.



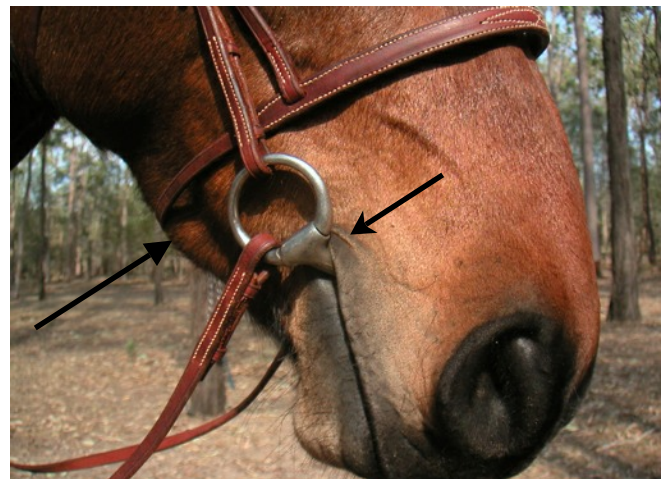
This browband is not actually pulling the headpiece of the bridle forwards (arrow) but if it was any shorter it would do. When the browband is too short it rubs the back of the ears which are very sensitive.

bumps'). A too tight noseband in this case will cause additional pain. These 'tooth bumps', which are the roots of the large molars protruding down through the jaw, disappear over time as the tops of the teeth wear down in the mouth (and the large molars continue to 'erupt' upwards into the mouth). They are not usually a problem other than they can become tender if a noseband is fitted too tightly.

Unfortunately these days bridles are sold with 'Hanovarian' nosebands as standard. This means that people often use them when they are totally unnecessary. They are difficult to fit properly and should not be used by the inexperienced yet often are. The reason for using them (and other similar contraptions) is to force the mouth shut so that the horse cannot evade the bit. If a horse is evading the bit it is usually because the bit hurts, the rider is too heavy handed or the horse has not been educated to 'accept' the bit properly (or a combination of these factors). In this age of enlightenment

The browband can be a source of discomfort if not fitted properly. If it is too tight it can pull the headpiece too close to the ears so check that it is not doing this. Horses that are uncomfortable due to an ill-fitting browband may shake their head or may keep trying to rub the bridle off although many horses show no outward signs even though the browband is too tight.

A bridle may or may not have a noseband fitted. A noseband should not be tight around the nose/jaw of the horse (although many people fit a noseband in this way). There should be room to fit two fingers between the noseband and the head. Be especially careful with a young horse (up to five years old) that will have molars erupting in the jaw ('tooth



In this example the bit is slightly too high in the mouth (even though creases in the mouth corners used to be regarded as correct - arrow). The noseband is correctly fitted but notice the 'tooth bumps' of this five year old horse (arrow) which can become painful if a noseband rubs them. In many cases a noseband is not necessary.

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A girth should ideally fit when on the middle holes of the girth straps, so that there is room for expansion and contraction as the horse changes condition. Modern materials for girths tend to work well and are easier to keep clean - an important consideration when you consider that girth galls can be caused by dirt. Modern girths tend to have some elasticised properties which is good also.

form on your hands and feet if you do unaccustomed hard physical work. A girth that is too tight or too loose can also cause girth galls (too tight causes too much pressure, too loose can move around and rub).

A saddle cloth or blanket can be used to keep the underside of the saddle clean and to soak up or wick away sweat. Synthetic saddles should always have a saddle cloth underneath them because they create a lot of heat. Western saddles must always be used in conjunction with a thick pad because the saddle itself does not have padded panels.

Make sure that the saddle cloth is pulled up into the gullet of the saddle *before* the girth is fastened, otherwise the saddlecloth will pull tight over the withers and cause a sore spot. Once the girth is fastened check that the saddle cloth has not been pulled down tight over the withers.

many people talk of having a better 'partnership' with their horse yet this is often not reflected in the harsh gear and gadgets that they use. It is a good idea to evaluate your gear from time to time and check that you are not using harsh gear simply because it is fashionable to do so or because you do not know any better.

A girth should be the correct length and should not rub (which will cause girth galls/pressure sores). The material that a girth is made from can lead to rubbing as can a build up of dirt on the girth and/or on the horse. When a horse has been out of work for some time girth galls are more likely to occur when that horse returns to work due to the skin in this area becoming softer (this of course applies to young horses who are starting work for the first time), in the same way that blisters initially

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A poorly fitting saddle causes many problems because poor saddle fit is exacerbated by the weight of the rider. A saddle can be too narrow in the tree (the internal 'frame') which will pinch the horse's back or too wide (which will cause the saddle to put direct pressure on the bones of the horse's back). A saddle can be too short (which will concentrate the weight of the rider into an area that is too small) or too long (which will put the weight of the rider over the weakest part of the horse's back - near the loins).



Remember that a horse changes shape as he or she loses or gains condition and develops or loses muscle tone. For example a saddle that is fitted to a four year old horse will not necessarily fit that same horse after a year or two of work because the horse will have developed muscle that will cause the back to change shape.

This saddle is the correct length for the horse's back, neither too short or too long. The good quality thick saddle 'pads' shown here are needed under this style of saddle because they do not have padded panels as 'English' saddles do.

If possible a saddle should be fitted by a professional saddle fitter. Saddlery stores often provide this service. If not your riding instructor, Pony Club or local riding club should be able to help with gear fitting in general. In fact why not suggest to your club that you have a gear fitting day and get an expert in to teach the members?

This article is just a quick guide to fitting gear and covers some of the more important points. For more information see our book *Horse Safe - A complete guide to equine safety*. This book is available from our website [www.equiculture.com.au](http://www.equiculture.com.au)



Two other areas for concern with saddles are that the pommel should sit well above the withers and that a hand should be able to be run down between the saddle and the shoulder each mirroring the other i.e. your hand should not feel more or less pressure as it moves downwards.

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