

All About Pets

The national pet care information service

CORRECTLY FITTING TACK



THE BLUE CROSS

Britain's pet charity

Tack is a term used to describe the bridle, saddle and accessories worn by a horse. There are numerous types and makes of saddles and bridles. It is essential that any tack used should be suitable for the purpose intended and fitted correctly. Damaged and ill-fitting tack can affect the horse's comfort (causing behavioural problems when ridden) and may result in serious injuries.



The bridle

Bridles may be made of leather, webbing or synthetic material, and are secured by stitching, buckles and billets. They are available in three main sizes (pony, cob and full) and are fully adjustable. The standard cavesson nose band can be changed to a different style if required.

To check the fit of a bridle:

- The headpiece, which forms the main part of the bridle (in combination with the cheek pieces), should lie comfortably behind the horse's poll
- The brow band should rest across the horse's forehead (preventing the headpiece from slipping backwards), with a clearance of two finger widths to prevent the headpiece from pinching the ears
- It should be possible to place two fingers under the cavesson noseband if this is correctly fastened
- The cheek pieces should be buckled equally and should allow the bit to lie comfortably in the mouth, creating only a slight wrinkle at the corner of the lips
- The bit should lie flat in the horse's mouth, with approximately one centimetre of clearance on either side of the mouth



The bit

The bit forms the mouthpiece of the bridle and is one of the means by which a rider, via the reins, communicates with and directs the horse. There are many different types of bit, which can be classified into five types according to their mode of action (bit-less bridles form a further group). Snaffle bits are the mildest and should be the most commonly used. Other types of bit are generally more severe.

The bit must be of the correct size and fit to ensure it works correctly and is comfortable for the horse. Bits are available (in increments of 0.5 cm) in sizes ranging from 9 cm (3 inches) to 15 cm (6 inches). Bit sizes are measured along the length of the bar between the inner edges of each bit ring, when the bit is laid flat.

The size and shape of the mouth varies from horse to horse and, together with other factors (such as the individual's age and level of schooling), need to be taken into consideration when selecting a suitable bit for an individual horse.

The action and strength of a bit may be altered or increased by the application of a different style of noseband, the type and fit of which will influence the degree of pressure on the nose.

The saddle

It is vitally important a saddle is both well-fitting and positioned correctly on the horse's back. Fitting should be carried out by a qualified saddle fitter, although every rider should be able to position a saddle correctly for use and be able to identify signs that a saddle no longer fits and requires attention. If the horse's shape alters, as a result of weight gain or muscle development, the fit of the saddle will need to be checked.

How to correctly position a well-fitting saddle.

- The saddle should be placed on the back, over the wither, and then slid backwards into its natural resting place. Check that the saddle is balanced and level and not tipping backwards or forwards. There should be a broad-bearing surface, with the weight distributed evenly along the horse's back.



- No part of the saddle should make contact with the spine or wither. The gullet of the saddle should be approximately 6.5 cm wide along its full length – there should be a similar clearance between the front of the saddle and the top of the horse's wither.
- The position of the point of the saddle tree should sit behind the horse's shoulder blade, so that it does not restrict the horse's normal movement. The tree-arches and points should not dig into the horse's shoulder.
- The back saddle should not sit too far along the back (as the horse is not designed to take weight on its lumbar region) and no further back than the start of the last rib.
- Ideally, the rider should use a mounting block, or get a leg-up when mounting, to avoid twisting the saddle and affecting its position or straining the horse's back. When the horse is being ridden, the saddle should not move significantly in any direction and should remain well fitting and balanced.



The girth

Girths are a vital piece of tack, attaching the saddle to the horse and helping maintain its position. They are available in many shapes, types and sizes to suit a range of different saddles. Essentially, a girth should be broad and smooth, fitting comfortably around the horse's breast. Most general purpose saddles have three girth straps and it is correct to attach the girth to the first and third of these on each side. A correctly fastened girth should rest approximately one hand's width behind the horse's elbows.

Saddle cloths, numnahs and pads

Saddle cloths and numnahs are used to keep the underside of the saddle clean and to minimise saddle slip. If they are too thick or allowed to crease up under the saddle, they can alter the fit of an otherwise well-fitting saddle. They should not be used in an attempt to improve the fit of an ill-fitting saddle. Undue pressure can be placed on the horse's withers and spine if a saddle cloth or numnah is not pulled up fully into the gullet. Pads are often used to alter the fit of a saddle. If such measures are necessary long-term, then the saddle clearly does not fit and a new, well-fitting replacement should be purchased.

Influence of the rider

A bit is only as kind as the manner in which it is applied. A rider with hard hands, who constantly pulls or jerks the reins, can cause soreness, bruising and a great deal of discomfort to the horse's mouth. In the wrong hands, any bit, irrespective of its severity, can cause a great deal of pain and distress to a horse.

Placing a more severe bit in a horse's mouth, to increase control and therefore enable a forward-going horse to be ridden by a less experienced rider, is a recipe for disaster. In such circumstances, the horse is being forcibly prevented from going forward, and instead may go sideways, backwards or even rear upright, with potentially serious consequences.

When mounted, the rider must sit centrally and correctly in the saddle, thereby distributing their weight evenly. A correctly fitting saddle will help the rider to adopt the optimum position, allowing for the correct application of leg and seat aids, as well as ensuring maximum security. However, a poor rider who sits badly (crookedly or tipping forwards or backwards) can have a detrimental effect on the horse's balance and put pressure on the animal's back.

An uncomfortable or poorly fitting saddle may be evident in the way a horse moves and reacts when the saddle is used. For example, the horse may become reluctant to move forward, and may start hollowing or hunching its back or even buck. A rider should be observant of any changes in a horse's physical appearance and behaviour that may indicate that a saddle no longer fits comfortably. The advice of a qualified saddle-fitter should be sought.

Rugs

In the interests of safety and comfort, a horse's rug should be of a suitable type and correctly fitted. A rug that slips, has been on too long without being reset or does not fit correctly from the outset, will rub the horse and cause discomfort.

Checking the fit of a rug

The size of rug required is calculated by measuring along the side of the horse, from the middle of the chest to the point of the buttock. Rugs are sized in increments of three inches (approximately 7.5cm) and standard sizes range from four feet (122cm) to seven feet six inches (229cm).

Horses vary in both size and shape – the depth of their girth or neck and size of their shoulder can all affect how a rug fits. The cut of the different rugs can also vary, enabling the most appropriately shaped rug to be selected to suit an individual horse.



A rug should fit well around the horse's shoulder and around the base of the neck. The front of the rug, when it is fastened, should not be able to slip back and down below the point of the shoulder. The rug should fit comfortably over the top of the neck in front of the horse's wither, and should not be able to slip backwards down the horse's spine.

The horse should be able to move freely and be able to lie down and roll without the rug slipping or causing restriction. An especially broad horse may require a size larger than measured.

All fastenings should be secure and measures taken to prevent them from coming undone. In addition to chest straps, rugs are fastened either by cross-surcingles (straps which cross from one side to the other underneath the horse's belly), by a pair of hindleg straps (that pass between and around the hindleg), or a combination of both.

There should be a clear hand's width between the horse's belly and the surcingle, and leg straps should be similarly adjusted to allow a hand-width between the strap and the horse's thigh on both sides. The leg straps should also be looped through each other to prevent rubbing, enabling them to work together and prevent the rug from slipping.

Rugs should be cleaned and dried regularly, with outdoor rugs also being maintained in a waterproof condition. Straps, buckles and stitching should be inspected regularly for signs of damage and any necessary repairs made immediately.

Related Blue Cross publications

The following leaflets from the *All About Pets* series may be useful.

- *Choosing a riding horse (H1)*
- *Safety around horses (H2)*
- *Exercise and ongoing training (H17)*

All About Pets

The national pet care information service

All About Pets provides expert advice, information and support for pet owners. It aims to ensure the welfare of Britain's pets by promoting responsible animal care. For further information and advice on caring for your pet or horse visit www.allaboutpets.org.uk. Alternatively, you can write to us at the address below to request a list of available leaflets.

All About Pets is a service of The Blue Cross, Britain's pet charity, which provides practical support, information and advice for pet and horse owners. Through our network of animal adoption centres we rehome thousands of animals each year. Our hospitals provide veterinary care for the pets of people who cannot afford private vets' fees.

How you can help

The Blue Cross is a registered charity and receives no government funding. We rely entirely on the generosity of pet lovers to help support All About Pets and other vital animal welfare projects. Any contribution would be most welcome. For more information on how you can help call us on 01993 822651 or visit our website at www.bluecross.org.uk.



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Registered charity no: 224392