

## EquiSearch's Ask the Vet: How Saddle Width Affects Fit

Dr. Joyce Harman details how a saddle's width can adversely affect its fit on your horse in this edition of EquiSearch.com's Ask the Vet.

By Dr. Joyce Harman

**Question 1:** I am a therapeutic riding instructor and have noticed several of our mounts developing back problems in our school. I am concerned it is the improper leaning on the neck by some of the larger students while in a two-point position. Some students cannot support the body without this tripod position and thus use the neck as a balance point, even to the point of tipping the saddle up off the back. Does this leaning on the neck transfer to back issues in a harmful manner? We have the horses adjusted yet they are not given enough down time to recuperate and for the adjustment to produce lasting effects.

**Question 2:** Can poor saddle fit cause my horse's hair to turn white? My gelding has a small circle of white hairs on each side of his withers. I use a good pad, and my saddle seems to sit well on his back but since my horse has lost some weight in his withers it's more noticeable. Also, can bad saddle fit cause my horse to limp or even buck? And can a bad fit be fixed by a better pad or a wither pad?

**Question 3:** My Tennessee Walking Horse is used strictly for trail riding and has nice prominent withers. I am presently using a Western saddle that I purchased for a previous horse with an Equipedic pad. The saddle looks like it fits him nicely, but whenever we climb large hills, the saddle moves back on his back. I also use a breast collar along with the saddle. How tight should the breast collar be?



[> Click to enlarge image](#)

Photo 1

**Answer:** All three of the questions above are actually about similar issues surrounding saddle fit. To begin with, a saddle that fits well tends to stay in its proper place most of the time while the rider gets into different positions. So, with the therapeutic riding school saddles flipping up at the back when the rider stands in the stirrups (see photo 1), the first question I would ask is if the saddle is too wide? A saddle that is too wide tends to tip down in front as weight is placed into the stirrups, whether Western or English. When that occurs, all the pressure is placed onto one small area at the front of the saddle on the sides of the withers.

Also, as in photo 1, the rider may feel she needs to brace with her legs forward to keep her from falling forward. All riders, especially therapeutic riders will feel less safe when the saddle tips forward, but most will not know why, just that they are not feeling secure. With the therapeutic riders, they are leaning forward for a different reason, but the back of the saddle

should not flip up if the tree is correct. And they will lean harder if they are out of balance. Most horses should be able to support the weight of the rider on their neck without much problem, especially if they receive some regular chiropractic adjustments as you said they did.

In the case of the horse that has lost some weight, the white hairs are showing up because the saddle is now too wide and all the pressure is in the front of the saddle (see photo 2). Any increase in the number of white hairs that you see means there is too much pressure. Once you remove the pressure, many of the white hairs will remain permanently.



[> Click to enlarge image](#)

Photo 2

Saddle movement is often, but not always, an indication of poor fit. I know quite a few 100-mile endurance riders who climb mountains all day and wear their girths so loose you can see daylight between the horse and the girth. However, I do NOT recommend testing your saddle fit in this way, it is just an illustration of how solidly a saddle can stay in place when it fits (also you need to be a balanced rider). It is OK and common to need a breastplate or crupper (or on a mule, both) when you climb steep terrain, jump big fences or move fast as in cutting cows or roping.

If your saddle is slipping, take a look at it to see if it is too wide (the most common cause of slippage), with the front of the saddle tipping down and the back flipping up. Or, is it too narrow, with the front sitting up higher and the back tilting down (see photo 3)? If you decide you need a breast collar or crupper for the right reasons, it should be loose for all normal riding, just coming into play when you are at the extremes of movement (big hills, jumps, fast turns).



[> Click to enlarge image](#)

Photo 3

All of these scenarios translate into back pain for the horse. The white hairs only occur when the pressure is constant and significant. The back pain from a saddle tipping forward with no white hairs can be just as painful to the horse as pressure that causes white hairs. Behaviors such as bucking, rearing, stumbling and resisting work all relate to back pain.

Lameness is common when the saddle is too wide, since all of the rider's weight is concentrated at the front of the saddle, going down to the front legs. Saddles that are too narrow tend to concentrate the weight at the back of the saddle and are more likely to cause rear limb lameness. Therapeutic riding horses are the saints of the horse world because they put up with unbalanced riders without complaining. But a poor-fitting saddle can cost the organization more in lame horses or ones that develop behavioral issues and have to be retired. My [English and Western saddle-fit books and DVDs](#) go through the whole fitting process in an easy to read/view fashion.

Pads and shims can be used to help a situation, but they are not the cure-all that some companies would lead you to believe. You can add carefully beveled shims, one on each side, to the front 1/3 of a saddle that is too wide to lift it up. But a saddle that is significantly too wide will still tip down and carry the weight forward. My books, mentioned above, have details

about how to make shims. A pommel pad usually crosses the withers, is not beveled for a smooth transition from front to rear and leaves a gap in the center of the saddle without pressure, called bridging. Pommel pads also make good beds for dogs and cats!

With a little patience and time taken to evaluate your saddle, you can figure out what part of the saddle fit equation is causing saddle movement, back pain, white hairs or lameness. When you correct that--sometimes it does mean a different saddle or shim and pad combination--you will find that the rider is more balanced, even if he or she is a therapeutic rider.

*Dr. Joyce Harman is a veterinarian and respected saddle-fitting expert certified in veterinary acupuncture and veterinary chiropractic; she is also trained in homeopathy and herbal medicine. Her [Harmany Equine Clinic](#) is in northern Virginia. Visit her [online shop](#).*

Have you had a similar experience? Chat about it in the [EquiSearch.com forum](#).

Do you have a veterinary or saddle-fit question for Dr. Harman? Send it to [asktheexperts@equinetwork.com](mailto:asktheexperts@equinetwork.com). Check back for her answers on EquiSearch.com.

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