

There's no bigger barrier to riding than an aching posterior! **Dr Russell MacKechnie-Guire** talks to **Stephanie Bateman** about how saddle fit and design can impact our riding comfort.

# Are you sitting comfortably?



Main image: Jon Stroud / Portrait: Matthew Roberts

**E**questrians are notorious for brushing over their own aches and pains. Feeling saddle sore, suffering with chafed cheeks and having bruised bits tends to be something riders quietly seek internet advice for, rather than broadcasting their troubles to the whole yard - but perhaps they are conversations we should start having. Posterior pain isn't just confined to equestrians, either; female cyclists frequently report saddle-related difficulties.

"We're moving into an era, thanks to science, where saddle fit for the horse is important, but saddle fit for the rider is just as crucial," says Russell. "We're moving away from the idea that riders just have to 'get on with it' if they find their saddle uncomfortable. It's really important for encouraging equestrian participation at every level that all riders feel comfortable in the saddle, with their pelvis in a neutral position and their seat bones vertical."

So, what is it about saddles that can potentially cause a problem?

"There are a number of factors that can affect rider comfort," says Russell.

### Seat size and design

"You can have two 17.5 inch saddles but the shape of the seat could be very different," Russell explains. "For example, a deep seat might give the rider a greater sense of security, but it can create restriction so they won't be able to move their pelvis as much. Likewise, where the rider is sitting on the rise of the cantle, that will then pitch their pelvis forward - which means the rider is then pivoting on their fork which gives discomfort to the front of the pelvis. In those cases, if the pelvis is tipped down, the rider will develop a hollow back in

order to sit upright and therefore they can get lower back pain.

"When the rider gets on, they should be able to hang their leg and be in a neutral position. If you imagine that the pelvis is a bowl of water, the rider should be able to stay in a position where the water isn't tipped out of the front or the back of the pelvis."

### Consult your saddle fitter

Don't suffer in silence. If you're reducing your time in the saddle due to discomfort, your qualified saddle fitter can assess the fit and balance of your saddle, and together you can see what you can resolve.

### Saddle shape

"A saddle that is too wide will tip the pelvis down at the front, whereas a saddle that is too narrow will tip the pelvis down at the back," explains Russell. "This is why it is so important that a qualified saddle fitter fits your saddle and that the rider is observed riding in the saddle - you should never buy a saddle based on a static fit alone."

### Half-pads

"We did a study where we put a thin medical grade foam half pad underneath the saddle, and what we found was that it didn't increase the pressures under the front part of the saddle for the horse but it did decrease the pressure under where the rider sits," Russell observes. "What we believe is happening is that the half pad is dampening down some of those forces, so for the rider, it may be, in discussion with their saddle fitter, that they add a half pad or layer of material under the saddle to help buffer some of the forces coming up from the horse."

### Seat savers

"We've been looking at seat savers for years and there are some that do dampen the forces under the seat," says Russell. "Be careful though: if the saddle fits you, you and your saddle fitter need to check that it doesn't become too small when adding a seat saver - because that will have an effect on your pelvis and push you onto your front."

### Getting to the bottom of the problem

If the problem is occurring inside your clothing, then you have a number of options.

"If the rider's underwear is causing pressure points, the first point of call is to explore garments with improved comfort features such as flat seams or padding, like cycling shorts," recommends Russell.

Cyclists have another top tip to offer saddle-sore equestrians: application of chamois cream is popular among both male and female cyclists for reducing chafing. The cream can tackle problem areas occurring, both between skin surfaces (such as between buttock cheeks; an issue caused by long walk hacks for some riders) and between skin and underwear. As well as providing lubrication, many chamois creams contain anti-bacterial and anti-fungal ingredients to help keep riders problem-free, particularly in hot weather.

To find a Society of Master Saddlers' Qualified Saddle Fitter, visit [mastersaddlers.co.uk](http://mastersaddlers.co.uk)

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