

Choosing a Saddle Pad

A saddle pad protects your horse's back from friction that could be caused by a saddle rubbing directly on your horse's hair and skin. It also helps to protect the saddle by absorbing some of your horse's sweat.

If your saddle fits well, you'll require only a simple saddle pad. In fact, if you add too much bulk with saddle padding you can cause the saddle not to fit and create pressure points.

If you have challenges with your horse's back—such as high withers or sore spots—or if the fit of your saddle is not perfect, you may need to use specially designed saddle pads to alleviate or at least lessen the severity of the problem.

The type of saddle pad you choose depends in part on function and in part on your riding discipline.

Shaped Saddle Pads

Shaped saddle pads are curved to mimic the shape of the saddle. They are available for jumping, all-purpose and dressage saddles, and they can be made of either genuine sheepskin or synthetic fleece.

Pads are available with both sides made of fleece, with cotton quilting on the interior, and with grippy panels to help prevent slipping. Examples of each of these styles of pads include Dover's Double-Faced Luxo-Fleece Pad, Wilker's Cling-On Fleece Pad and the Medallion Super Quilt High Profile Pad.

Size is usually determined by matching the pad to both the type of saddle and the seat size. (To measure the seat size, run a tape measure from one of the screw heads on the side of the pommel to the middle of the cantle.) You want an even border of about two inches of saddle pad showing around the circumference of your saddle. To achieve the perfect look for your particular saddle, you may want to try pads from different manufacturers.

For the show ring, most hunter riders use shaped pads in crisp white. Both synthetic fleece and genuine sheepskin pads are acceptable; consult your trainer for any preference.

The advantages of synthetic fleece pads include an economical price point and the ability to be machine washed with laundry detergent. The advantages of genuine sheepskin pads include the ability for the sheepskin fibers to mold to your horse's back and to naturally wick away moisture and increase air circulation.

Square Saddle Pads

Square saddle pads come in a variety of stock color choices and stitching patterns that can add some color to your schooling sessions. They can also be ordered in custom color combinations.



Square pads may have a thin layer of batting or foam on the interior to provide a bit of cushioning for your horse, and some are lined with fabrics that offer moisture-wicking properties. Many are slightly shaped in front to accommodate the knee rolls of jumping and all-purpose saddles.

“Square” dressage saddle pads are essentially rectangular in appearance with straight sides to accommodate the longer saddle flaps of dressage saddles. Dressage pads are available in various widths and lengths, with average sizes ranging from 22 inches wide to 46 inches long.

Some styles of dressage pad offer swallowtail detailing, such as on the Warendorf Swallowtail Dressage Pad, or contrasting piping, as can be seen on the Rider's International Velvet Dressage Pad. A contoured shape in the wither area can be more comfortable for horses with high withers, and also may help the pad stay in place on any horse.

For competition, event riders in the cross country phase have free range of color choices in square pads. In fact, the saddle pad is an opportunity to display stable, team or club colors. Jumpers in competition who choose to use a square pad usually select one in white, although colored pads are allowed.



Measuring a Dressage Pad

The width of the dressage pad corresponds to the length of the saddle seat; it should cover your horse's back under the saddle with a bit of pad visible in front of the pommel and behind the cantle. The amount of pad you see is up to your personal preference and the needs of your horse.



Illustrates how width is measured.

The length of the dressage pad corresponds to the length of the saddle flap. The saddle pad should be long enough to cover the side of your horse under the saddle flap; you should see a bit of pad below the tip of the saddle flap. The amount of pad you see is up to your personal preference and the needs of your horse.



Illustrates how length is measured.

Choosing a Saddle Pad

Dressage riders in competition are required to compete using a white or conservatively-colored saddle pad such as cream or black. White is the safest and most traditional color choice, and judges who've been interviewed on the subject tend to prefer to see white pads. Monograms and breed logos are permitted to appear on both sides of the saddle pad as long as they do not exceed a 200 centimeter square. When sponsorship is permitted, the name or logo of a sponsor may appear instead of a monogram, but with the same size restraint.



Pillow or Comfort Pads

Pillow pads are similar to square pads for schooling, but they're filled with polyester batting and quilted for cushiony comfort. If you choose to use a pillow saddle pad, be sure that your saddle fit can accommodate the extra thickness. If your saddle fits perfectly to your horse, you may not have room to use this thicker type of pad without changing the way the saddle sits on your horse.

Baby Pads

Baby pads are ultra-thin sheets typically used under heavier saddle pads to keep them clean. The purpose of baby saddle pads is to cut down on having to launder the larger, more cumbersome pads.

Specialty Pads

Specialty pads are designed to solve many problems ranging from saddle fitting issues to reducing equine back pain, heat, trauma and friction. Depending on the function, they may be intended for use under, over or in place of conventional saddle pads.

- Withers back pads have open slots over the withers. The opening relieves pressure on the spine and can improve the fit of a saddle on some horses.
- Gel pads and foam pads are intended to help or prevent sore backs. They absorb the impact of rider activity and help to distribute

weight more evenly along your horse's back to relieve pressure points. They can be made of a variety of materials. Gel pads are typically very dense and thin. Though they can initially seem a bit pricey, gel pads maintain resiliency and continue to provide benefits for many years of use—making them a solid investment. Foam pads are thicker than gel, and are less expensive. The foam may eventually compress over time and for maximum benefit to your horse, should at that time be replaced.

- Lift back or riser pads raise the cantle of a saddle and are used when the seat is tilting backward. If you use this type of pad, be sure to check the fit in the front of the saddle, and check your horse's wither area for signs of pain or injury regularly. By raising the back of the saddle with a riser pad, you may create pinching or pressure points at the wither area. (Typically, if a saddle is tilting backward, it means the tree is too narrow for the horse.)
- Lift front pads raise the pommel of the saddle to level the seat if it is tilting forward. If you use this type of pad, you should check your horse's back regularly for signs of pressure where the saddle may push into his back and create sore spots. (Typically, if a saddle is tilting forward, it means the tree is too wide for the horse.)

- Correction pads have thin removable shims that can help you adjust the way the saddle sits on your horse. Shims may be used to help alleviate crooked saddle fitting due to a horse's natural asymmetry.
- No-slip pads are used against a horse's skin and under the saddle pad to prevent the pad from slipping.
- Sheepskin pads and half pads are popular for the way the sheepskin fibers mold directly to horse's back, naturally wick away moisture and increase air circulation, and help distribute pressure and impact.

Some specialty pads offer a combination of benefits. For example, sheepskin pads such as the Mattes Square Correction Pad are available in correction models with shims. Some gel pads are available with cutback withers, and several types of foam pads offer a lift back feature.



Using a Short Girth

If you use a short girth with your dressage saddle, be sure that you have at least three to four fingers' width between the top of the girth and the bottom of the saddle pad and saddle flap on both sides. If the girth comes too close to the edge of the saddle pad or flap, your horse's skin can be pinched. Some people will use longer dressage girths to stretch up so that the top rests on the saddle pad to avoid pinching, but this may defeat the purpose of using a short girth to reduce bulk under the leg.



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