

How to Select a Girth

A properly fitted girth is essential as it keeps the saddle securely in place. It is also important for the comfort of your horse.

Girths are made out of a variety of materials and are available in many of sizes, shapes, colors and styles, each offering unique benefits to the horse. The right girth for your horse will depend on how he moves, skin sensitivity in the girthing area, allergies to textiles and on how much he sweats during work.

If your girth is sized correctly, you'll be able to adjust it on the same billet holes on each side of your horse—regardless of whether you are using a long girth or a short (dressage) girth.

Ideally, for a long girth, the buckles will not be located high under your thigh where they can feel bulky. When this happens, it means the girth is too long for the horse. Always be sure that you have at least two billet holes available above and at least one hole available below the buckles.

When sizing a short girth for a 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 to close to the edge of the saddle pad or flap, your horse's skin can feel pinched.

Some riders will use longer dressage girths to stretch up so that the top of the girth rests on the saddle pad to avoid pinching, but this method may defeat the purpose of using a short girth to reduce bulk under the leg.

How to Estimate Girth Length

You can estimate the length of girth you need by placing your saddle and saddle pad (along with any special padding you'll use under the saddle) on your horse. Have a helper hold a fabric tape measure with inch increments on approximately the middle billet hole on one side of the saddle, while you stretch the tape under the horse, one hand's width away from the back of the elbow, to the corresponding billet hole on the other side of the saddle. The inch measurement you obtain translates to the size girth you require.

Remember that different saddles will have different billet strap lengths, so you may have to change your girth size if you change your saddle. Also, if you measure a used girth to obtain the desired length for a new girth, remember that the old girth has probably stretched.

Converting Between Long and Short Dressage Girths

If you know your horse's girth size and you need to switch between a long and a short girth, add or subtract 20 inches. For example, if you use a 48 inch girth with your jumping saddle, you should try a 28 inch girth with your dressage saddle.

About Girth Covers

Similar to lined girths, girth covers exist to solve problems. They provide cushioning that relieves pressure points that can cause girth gall, absorb sweat or alleviate sensitivity issues in horses with delicate skin. If you need to use a girth cover, it should be kept clean to provide the maximum benefit to the horse. It should also fit snugly so that it doesn't roll or bunch, which can cause rubs.

Girth socks – Girth socks slide over a girth just like a sock, and are made of either a knitted fabric or terry cloth. They're affordable and machine washable.

Genuine fleece girth cover – This type of cover helps to wick away moisture and provides some relief of pressure points. Some genuine fleece covers have hook and loop closures that allow you to adjust the width of the cover; others are fashioned like socks to slip over a girth. Genuine fleece products should be brushed clean after each use and washed only with a product designed for the purpose, such as Mattes Liquid Melp Sheepskin Cleaner.

Synthetic fleece girth cover – Similar to genuine fleece, synthetic covers provide a soft surface and can provide some relief of pressure points. They are an economical alternative to genuine fleece and are machine washable.



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Girth Accessories

A selection of accessories exists to solve girthing challenges that may arise.

Girth extender – This is a temporary measure used to extend the length of a girth that is too short to fit a horse. Ideally, because of the bulk girth extenders create, a longer girth should eventually replace the need for a girth extender.

Girth buckle guard – This is a piece of leather with holes for the billets to slide through. A buckle guard protects the underside of your saddle flap from friction wear produced by the girth buckles.

Girth rings/Girth aids – These are leather accessories that can be added to a girth to use with training reins and devices.



Styles and Types of Girths

The various materials used to make girths offer unique benefits to the horse and rider, affect price and even solve problems. You'll need to consider these factors as you make your girth selection. Additionally, consider that girths are available in straight styles, fashioned like a belt, or with anatomical contours that are designed to provide room for a horse's elbows during movement. Some designs are intended to relieve pressure on the horse's sternum.

The most important aspect about the shape and material of your girth is that it works well with your horse's unique conformation, movement and skin to distribute pressure evenly along his barrel. It needs to work with the horse, moving ever so slightly with the hair (horizontally) and not against it (vertically) in such a way as to cause rubbing or chafing. If a girth is too narrow for a horse, it concentrates pressure on a narrow band of his barrel and that pressure can be uncomfortable.

Some long girths have built-in belly guards appropriate for jumpers. The belly guards protect the horse from being injured from shoe studs while his hooves are tucked up tightly over jumps. Others have built-in rings for training aids.

Elastic ends are another feature designed for comfort and for ease of use. Some older, traditional girth styles do not incorporate elastic into their design, but most girths have elastic on at least one end. Elastic ends make the girth fastening process easier, and provide some flexibility and comfort for the horse as his ribcage moves during exercise. Some dressage girths have built-in elastic panels rather than elastic ends.

Leather girths – Choose leather for the most traditional look. Leather girths are offered in many shades of brown to coordinate with saddles, and in black for dressage. Brown dressage girths can be specially ordered. Leather girths can be quite simple in design or feature two-tones of leather, fancy stitching and overlays. They are easy to care for, and quality leather girths become softer and more luxurious with conditioning. This type of girth may have elastic on one or both ends, and can be found in straight or contoured shapes.

Neoprene girths – Popular for their easy care and affordability, some riders choose this type of girth when they've experienced slipping problems with leather girths. Neoprene girths are typically wide and have elastic ends so they offer a good amount of comfort for horses. They're easy to clean with gentle soap and water. Be aware that some horses are allergic to neoprene.

Synthetic girths – This type of girth is popular because of its affordability, durability and easy care. Long styles are available in black and brown; short styles are available in black and can be specially ordered in brown. Synthetic girths are offered in contoured and straight styles and are easy to clean with soap and water.

String girths – Made of mohair, wool, cotton or nylon string, this type of girth is a popular choice for combating slippage, for horses that get irritated skin in the girth area and to alleviate certain pressure points. Some riders feel that string girths are cooler for summer riding. The strings that make up the girth can move and act independently of one another so that some horses do very well wearing them. Cotton string girths should be hand-washed in cold water (warmer temperatures may cause shrinkage) and hung to dry. Nylon girths can be machine washed and hung to dry.

Wool or synthetic fleece-lined girths – Genuine wool or synthetic fleece may be attached to fabric or leather girths to help horses who need a soft surface against their skin. Genuine wool lining has the added benefit of helping to wick sweat away from the horse. A completely synthetic lined girth can be hand or machine-washed on gentle cycle and hung to dry. The fleece on many leather models of this type of girth is attached with hook and loop for easy cleaning.

Tip: Some horses that are "girthy" with a leather girth will be more comfortable in a fleece-lined girth or with a fleece cover on the leather girth.

Webbing or fabric – Often selected for either the horse's preference for the softness or the affordable price, this simple type of girth can be machine or hand-washed in cool temperatures and hung to dry.



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