How to Select and Size an English Saddle for a Rider

No matter what your riding discipline is—hunter, jumper, dressage, eventing or trail riding—a well-fitting saddle will enable you to achieve an effective and comfortable riding position.

As you select a saddle, you’ll want to find one that is suitable for your riding discipline and that fits both your horse and you very well. (For details on fitting a saddle to a horse, refer to “English Saddle-Fitting Guidelines.”)

Sit in, borrow and try as many saddles as you can when making a saddle purchase. Also, remember that the way a saddle feels when you’re sitting on a saddle buck will not necessarily be the same on a moving horse. Always get a second opinion on the way you look in a saddle from your Dover Saddlery product advisor, your instructor or a very knowledgeable friend.

Riding Discipline Determines Saddle Style

Your riding discipline influences the type of saddle you need, because the overall design of any saddle is intended to assist with your riding.

Hunter/Jumper and Hunter Equitation Riders require a jumping saddle that has a fairly shallow seat, with a low pommel and a low cantle. The saddle might have small knee rolls and small thigh blocks (though they vary greatly between models) combined with forward, short saddle flaps. Stirrup bars may be placed in a forward position. Typically, saddles for jumping have fairly narrow twists to provide a close contact feel with optimal leg contact, and will also have padding on or under the flaps to assist with security over fences. Together, these design features allow the rider to assume a forward seat position with a short stirrup length. Billet straps are short. Note though, that there are many differences in seat depth and flaps to accommodate rider preferences.

Dressage Riders, who need to sit deeply in a neutral, balanced position, require a dressage saddle with a deep seat, thigh blocks and long, straight flaps that encourage a long stirrup length. The depth of the seat and the size of the blocks are very much personal preference. Some riders prefer a very deep seat and/or large blocks, while others prefer small blocks and a shallower seat. Dressage saddles are available in many styles to suit these very personal preferences. The twists on dressage saddles also range from fairly narrow to wide, again to accommodate the differences in rider preferences and anatomy. Stirrup bars are usually located in such a manner as to allow the leg to hang down naturally from the rider’s hip. Most dressage saddles have long billets so that the girth buckles are not under the flap where they can affect leg contact with the horse’s barrel.

Cross-Country (event) riders usually appreciate a seat with a medium depth, varying degrees of knee and thigh blocks, and typically, a longer twist since these riders sometimes assume a “standing” position. The flaps of an eventing saddle are usually generous so that the rider can keep his or her legs on them while jumping drops downhill. The flaps will also have a forward rotation to accommodate various stirrup lengths, particularly short lengths for galloping. Often the flaps have padding to assist the rider in going over fences. Billet straps may be long or short depending on the model.

Trail riders/Fox hunters can choose nearly any type of saddle that makes them comfortable. Many people favor an all-purpose saddle, which melds design features required for both jumping and flatwork into one saddle. Flaps are generally longer than those of a jumping saddle, yet not as long and cut on a more forward rotation than the average dressage saddle. Some all-purpose saddles have enough of a knee block and forward rotation to allow a rider to assume a jumping position. Seat depths vary slightly to address the need for rider preferences, but in general these too are not as shallow as a saddle designed strictly for jumping. Billet straps are short.

Test Ride!

Dover Saddlery has a Trial Saddle Program, which allows you to ride in a saddle for several days to get a good sense as to whether it will work for you. Over 75 saddle models in a variety of sizes are available through the program.
**How to Select and Size an English Saddle for a Rider**

**How to Fit You!**

After you’ve determined the type of saddle you need, consider these key points to determine appropriate saddle fit:

- Hip to knee length
- Seat size
- Flap length and shape
- Riding style

Hip to knee length determines where your knee and leg fit in accordance to the angle and point of the flap. When you try out saddles, look to fit this part of your leg first. The rotation and size of the saddle flap should complement the angle of your leg. Your knee should hit at the top point of the flap with at least two fingers to spare.

Seat size affects your comfort level, ability to move and your effectiveness in your riding. Ignore the seat size measurement of the saddle, and work with what actually fits your body. Every manufacturer’s sizing will feel different between models of saddles. Most saddles require that you fit between three to four fingers (or a hand’s width) behind your bottom and the tip of the cantle. If you feel confined in a deep seated saddle, then try the next seat size up.

**Tip:** The seat size of an English saddle is measured in inches from either of the nail heads on the pommel to the middle of the cantle.

Flap length is less important than the way the flap shape complements the angle of your leg. As a very general guideline, the flap will fall only about a third of the way down your calf. The goal in determining flap length is to avoid having the edge of the saddle flap interfere with the top of your tall boot or half chap.

Riding style, your own personal preference for any one factor of the saddle, and your position as determined by your unique physical build is always important. For some riders, having two fingers behind their bottom at the cantle is sufficient as they prefer a snug seat. Others prefer a roomier feel in the seat.

**Related Topics**

- English Saddle-Fitting Guidelines
- Advantages of Synthetic and Leather Saddles
- Choices in Saddle Panels

---

**About the Twist Width**

Twist width is a fairly personal choice, too, though the twist is supposed to accommodate the horse’s shape more than the rider’s. The front of any saddle tree has a steep angle to fit over the horse’s withers, while the back of the tree has a flatter angle to accommodate a horse’s back. The twist occurs where the bars of the tree “twist” to form the transition between the front and back of the tree. The twist is located behind the pommel and at the front of the actual seat, as illustrated in the photos below. The width of the strip of leather over the twist doesn’t indicate twist width.

When you try a saddle, if you feel like you are sitting on a wide board, then the twist is too wide. The potential problem with riding in a saddle with a twist that is too wide for your build is that it could force you into a chair seat position. A twist that is appropriately narrow for you will allow your legs to hang down loosely on either side of the saddle. If a twist is too narrow for you, you may feel that your thighs are not being supported.

For more assistance or to request a catalog, call 1-800-989-1500 to speak with a Dover Saddlery product advisor, or stop by any of our retail stores.

Visit DoverSaddlery.com for a complete store listing and full product offering.