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Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service • Division of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources

Horses and Kids: Preparing to Ride

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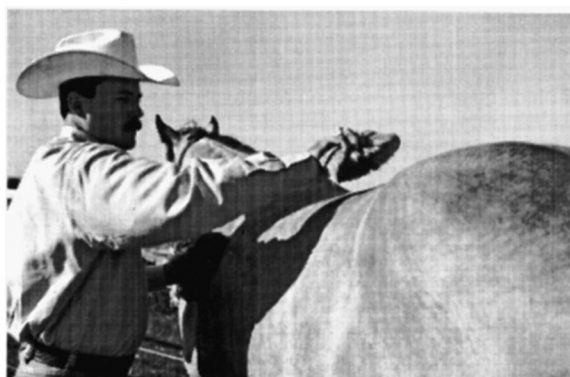
This fact sheet provides information that will help riders of all ages practice safe horse handling when preparing to ride. Knowing the safety precautions to follow while saddling, bridling, and mounting will help ensure an enjoyable experience for both horse and rider. Preparing to ride is just like all other horse-related activities, it should be supervised by an experienced rider.

Saddling Your Horse

Western Tack

Step 1. Prepare the Horse. Every horse, young and old, should be restrained in a safe area before saddling. The area should be free from obstructions and have secure, non-slip footing. Standing tied to a secure object or being held by a handler will limit the horse's movement and make the saddling process safer. Nervous or confined horses may need to be exercised using a longe line prior to saddling to burn off excess energy. The horse's back and girth areas should be well groomed to be certain they are clean and that the hair lies flat.

Step 2. Check the Saddle and Pad. When preparing to saddle the horse, always check your equipment to make sure everything is in good working order. Check the saddle



Be sure that the horse's back and girth areas are free from debris.

pad and girth for buildup of dirt or foreign objects because a burr under the saddle pad can cause a horse to buck.

Step 3. Blanketing and Saddling. Approach the horse's left shoulder while carrying the pad or blanket, making sure not to drag it. Allow younger and unfamiliar horses to smell the blanket until they stand quietly before placing it into position. Place the edge of the blanket on the horse's back just in front of the withers.

Hook the right stirrup over the saddle horn and lay the cinches back over the seat of the saddle. Never approach your horse carrying a saddle with the cinches dragging around your feet. There is the danger of stepping or tripping on the rigging and falling under the horse.

Raise the saddle up over the horse's back, and place it into position or swing the saddle into position as gently as possible. Having the rigging secured over the seat and horn prevents it from "banging" the horse's knee, shoulder, and ribs as the saddle is put into position. Dropping the saddle or throwing it onto a horse's back may scare or hurt the horse. A horse that has had a bad experience while being saddled will generally flinch or shy sideways as you approach with the saddle.

Never slide the saddle and pad forward on a horse's back because this will likely pull and bind the horse's hair, and could cause a sore back. If the saddle needs to be moved forward, the saddle and pad must be lifted off the horse's back before sliding them forward. If you are not tall enough or strong enough to do this, remove the saddle and pad and start over.

Step 4. Cinching the Saddle and Equipment. Once the saddle and pad are in place, move to the opposite side of the horse to let the stirrup and girths down. While on the off side, check the girth and back cinch for any necessary adjustments.

Before tightening the cinch, place your left hand under the neck of the blanket or pad and lift up under the gullet. This helps keep pressure off of the horse's withers and helps keep the horse's back dry by allowing a small amount of air under the pad.

When using a western, double-rigged saddle (one which has both a front and back cinch), always tighten the front cinch first to keep the saddle in place in case the horse moves.

Hook the left stirrup over the saddle horn until you have finished and are ready to mount. Reach under with



Reaching for the cinch with the right hand will help ensure your head is away from the horse's hind legs.

the right hand to catch the girth. This helps to keep your head away from the horse's hind legs. Before cinching, pull the girth up against the horse to see if he is going to object to the pressure. If the horse objects, check your equipment and ask for help from an experienced rider.

Tighten the cinch slowly and smoothly to allow the horse's senses to accommodate the pressure. The cinch should be firm enough to hold the saddle in place while you finish saddling the horse.

Again, reach under with the right hand to grasp the back cinch. If the horse is a known kicker, or is nervous and moving around, have a friend hand you the cinch under the horse's belly from the off side. Under most riding situations, the back cinch should not contact the horse's body when air is inhaled, but should be tight enough so there is no chance the horse could get a hind foot caught in it. Allow just enough room to slide a hand under the cinch when buckled.

The back cinch must be connected to the front cinch to prevent it from sliding back into the horse's flank. The safety strap should be adjustable to fit different horses. If the back cinch is not connected, remove it before riding.

After the cinch is tightened, fasten accessory equipment, such as a breast collar, martingale, or tie-down.

Check the front cinch before mounting. The cinch can be tightened after the horse has relaxed. The cinch should fit

tightly around the horse; however, you should be able to slide your hand behind the buckle without much difficulty. Secure the tail of the cinch strap through the keeper or back through the ring. If the tail is so long that it moves around as you ride, take another wrap through the cinch and fasten the girth.

Nothing is more dangerous than having a saddle turn while a rider is in the saddle. Therefore, always check the cinch adjustment after riding a short distance and tighten as the need arises.

English Tack

With only a few differences, you can follow the western safety precautions when saddling with English tack.

Before approaching the horse, lay the girth over the seat and run both stirrups all the way up the stirrup leathers.

When using a martingale, thread the girth through the martingale loop before the girth is fastened. Attach the off-side billets first. Next, the girth is pulled up and attached to the near side billets.

Before tightening the girth, smooth out any skin that may have wrinkled under the girth. Always check the girth adjustment before mounting and after riding a short distance.

Adjust the stirrup leathers to the proper length and run the stirrups up again until you are ready to mount.

Bridling Your Horse

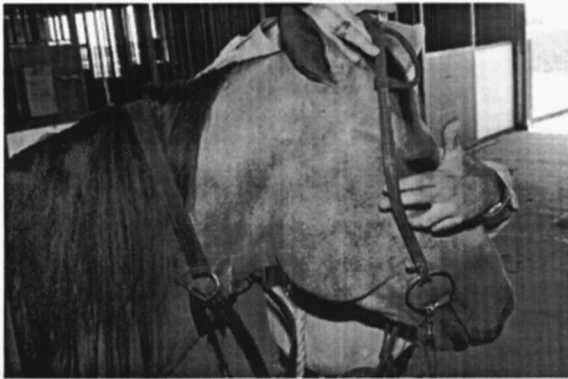
Bridling a horse should only take a few seconds. But, within this short time, there are a number of safety precautions that every rider should follow.

Step 1. Check the Bridle. Before bridling, make sure the headstall is properly adjusted and correctly attached to the bit. The curb chain should be behind the bit. When using a snaffle bit, the reins should always be attached above and behind the safety strap that connects the rings.

Step 2. Prepare the Horse. Bridling a horse safely always begins with the same step, untying the horse before removing the halter. Leaving a horse tied while removing the halter and fastening the crown piece around the horse's neck creates a dangerous situation for both horse and handler. Having a tied horse "spook" and set back with the crown piece around his neck could cause injury to the animal or catch the handler's hand under the halter.

Once untied, undo the halter and slip the noseband off the horse's nose. Always refasten the crown piece of the halter around the horse's neck. It is not uncommon to see experienced riders drop the halter and allow their horse to stand unattached while bridling. Even though many horses will stand quietly, this habit can eventually lead to problems. Experienced riders never leave a horse loose because even the most gentle, well-behaved horses can be startled and can run away.

Step 3. Bridling. To safely bridle a horse, stand close to the horse's left side near the throatlatch. Maintain contact with the lead rope by draping it over your right arm or shoulder. Loop the bridle reins over your left arm to keep them out of the dirt and out from under the horse's feet. Hold the crown of the headstall with your right hand and spread it with your fingers. If you are tall enough, reach over the horse's head with your right hand. If not, hold the crown piece in front of the horse's face, allowing the headstall to hang downward with the bit just below the horse's muzzle. Be careful not to



Pressing the left thumb on the bar space behind the incisors often encourages a horse to open its mouth (top). Avoid rubbing the cheek piece over the eyes (middle). Move the crown piece over the ears individually by gently bending them forward (bottom).

rub the headstall over the horse's eyes. The left hand should be open and flat while holding the mouthpiece. Use your little finger to hold the curb strap away from and behind the bit. A well-trained horse will often open its mouth and accept the bit. If the horse refuses the bit, press your left thumb on the bar space behind the horse's incisors to encourage the horse to open its mouth.

Insert the bit and lift the bridle upward, making sure the bit is over the tongue. Move the crown piece over the ears individually by gently bending them forward. Knocking the front teeth with the bit, dragging the cheek pieces over the

eyes, or handling the ears and head aggressively will cause a horse to be "head shy" or to refuse the bit by lifting or tossing his head. Once the headstall is in place, fasten the throatlatch.

Step 4. Adjust the Bridle. Before riding, always make sure the bridle is properly adjusted to fit each individual horse. There are four places to check for proper bridle adjustment: bit placement, curb strap, throatlatch, and ear piece or browband. Most horse handlers want the bit high enough to create a slight wrinkle in the corners of the mouth. The curb strap should be loose enough that two fingers can easily slide between the strap and the horse's chin. The throatlatch piece should be just loose enough to allow room for bending and flexing. The ear pieces or browband should rest comfortably around the ears and above the eyes.

Once the horse is properly bridled, undo the halter from around the horse's neck. It is a good idea to refasten the crown piece and put the halter and lead in a place so that they will be handy when you are ready to unsaddle.

Mounting Your Horse

Once the horse is saddled and bridled, you are probably anxious to jump into the saddle and ride. However, now is not the time to throw caution to the wind. When mounted incorrectly, even the most gentle, well-broke horse can be dangerous.

There is more than one way to correctly mount a horse. However, several safety precautions are common to them all—a safe location, a horse that stands quietly, and a confident and relaxed rider.

Step 1. Select a Safe Location. Lead your horse away from buildings, fences, and trees before mounting. Be cautious of objects, people, or other horses that may cause your horse to "spook." Never try to mount a horse that is standing on a slick surface, under low hanging objects, or in areas of heavy traffic (animal or vehicular).

It is always a good idea to check your tack and equipment again before mounting. Make sure that the girth is secure and the stirrups are properly adjusted.

It is customary to mount from the near (left) side. However, all horses should become accustomed to being mounted from either side.

Step 2. Restrain the Horse. Train your horse to stand quietly while you mount. You may wish to restrain the horse's forward movement by tightening the reins until light contact is made in the horse's mouth. With younger horses or horses with which you are unfamiliar, you may need a handler to restrain the horse's movement. If a handler is not present, shorten the left rein, and bend the horse's head and neck back toward you to limit forward movement.

Step 3. Mounting. When mounting from the near side, hold the reins in your left hand while gripping the horse's mane just in front of the saddle. This helps to calm the horse and provide the rider more control while mounting. Stand facing the side or rear of the horse and place your left foot securely in the stirrup. You may need to twist the stirrup with your right hand for easier access. Reach up with your right hand and grip the saddle horn while turning your body to face the horse's shoulder. Take one hop on your right foot for momentum and stand up in the stirrup, keeping your weight in close to the horse and over the midline. Be careful not to dig your

toe into the horse's ribs. Raise your right foot and swing your leg over and clear of the horse's rump. Place your right foot into the stirrup before settling into the saddle. Sit down quietly and smoothly. Dropping down into a saddle while "fishing" for the right stirrup can startle a horse into jumping sideways or bucking.

Dismounting

Before dismounting, find a suitable location. Your horse needs to stand quietly until you are completely dismounted. Hold the reins in your left hand with light contact on the bit. Rest your hand on the horse's neck just in front of the saddle. Hold the saddle horn with your right hand. Stand up in the saddle and remove your right foot from the stirrup. Swing your right leg over staying clear of the horse's rump. If capable, step down before you remove your left foot from the stirrup. However, if height is a problem, remove your left foot and gently slide or jump down. When this method is used, it is safer to have a handler present.

There are several important safety steps to follow immediately after dismounting. English riders should "run up" both stirrups. Dangling irons may startle or annoy the horse. Also, a horse may catch the bit or a hind leg in a stirrup when shoeing a fly. Closed reins and romals should be brought forward over the horse's head. Split reins should be brought down from around the horse's neck before leading. Tie-downs, martingales, and other accessories should be disconnected before leading or haltering and tying.

Unbridling

To unbridle a horse, reverse the bridling procedure. This sounds easy enough, but even experienced riders often

take risky short cuts. Again, stand close to the horse's left side. Loop the reins over your left arm and fasten the halter around the horse's neck. Unfasten the throatlatch before removing the headstall. Using your right hand, gently slip the headstall over the horse's ears. You may wish to pass the headstall to your left hand before lowering the bridle. Lower the bridle slowly, allowing the horse to push the bit out of his mouth. Never jerk or pull the bit from a horse's mouth. If you hurt the horse's mouth, he will associate the pain with the bit and will likely be more difficult to handle the next time you plan to ride.

Unsaddling

To correctly unsaddle a horse, simply reverse the saddling procedure. Always unfasten any accessory equipment (such as breast collars, martingales, and tie-downs) before loosening the cinches. Hook the left stirrup over the saddle horn. Next, unfasten the back cinch before loosening the front cinch. If for some reason your horse is spooked or gets loose, the front cinch will keep the saddle safely in place.

Summary

- Never take even the most simple safety precautions for granted when preparing to ride.
- When learning to saddle, bridle, and mount a horse, always ask an experienced rider for assistance.
- Know your abilities and limitations. Do not be afraid to ask for help.
- Paying close attention to your horse and surroundings and using good judgment when preparing to ride will help provide a safer and more enjoyable experience.