

The Biomechanics of Riding Bareback

By Joyce Harman DVM

FROM
**PRACTICAL
HORSEMAN**

A veterinarian discusses how weight distribution while riding bareback differs from that when using a saddle.

QUESTION: I am interested in finding information on bareback riding, specifically its effect on the horse's back, i.e., weight-distribution. Have any studies been done comparing bareback riding to riding with a (well-fitting) saddle? Also, what sorts of position adjustments are recommended from a classical dressage seat to a bareback seat?



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ANSWER: I have used a computerized saddle pad to evaluate the weight distribution of a bareback rider compared to that of a rider in a saddle. Although you might expect your weight to be better distributed by a saddle's wider surface area, I found that bareback riding creates fewer pressure points. This is most likely because the primary points of contact between the horse and bareback rider are the rider's thighs and the horse's back, which are both moving surfaces. When you add a rigid saddle to the equation, you interfere with this dynamic connection. (Only a very skinny person without much padding on her bottom who sits absolutely still for a long period of time risks creating pressure points on her horse's back.)

Bareback riding is only uncomfortable for a horse who has pain or discomfort at the exact spot on which your seat bones rest. For all other horses, carrying bareback riders should be no less comfortable and no harder work than carrying them with a saddle. However, it is a different sensation, so some horses may feel a little funny at first. They also may worry more when they sense that you are less balanced and stable.

From the rider's perspective, going bareback is an excellent tool for improving balance and learning to feel more connected to your horse. Everybody should be required to do it when they're learning to ride! However, I would not advise trying it on a horse with extremely narrow, high withers. If you're constantly trying to protect yourself from your horse's withers, your riding will be less effective. And, needless to say, it can be dangerous to your anatomy. I also don't recommend using a bareback pad—a cushioned saddle pad with a girth-like strap securing it to the horse—for extra comfort, because it can be unstable and prone to slipping around your horse's belly.

Depending on your and your horse's conformation, riding bareback may put you in a less effective and less balanced position. The thicker your thighs and the wider your horse, the more your legs will be pushed out to the sides with your lower legs flapping in the breeze. This makes it difficult to use your leg aids properly. Also, because your hip joints can't widen beyond a certain point, your pelvis is rocked backward, throwing your body out of balance. If you and your horse have this conformation combination, bareback riding may not be beneficial for your riding skills.

If you do decide to try riding bareback, first do it in a safe, enclosed area. Whatever your goals, remember that it is supposed to be fun. This is a great chance for you and your horse to relax and enjoy!

Dr. Joyce Harman combines her traditional veterinary medical background with a variety of holistic treatment methods. A Certified Veterinary Acupuncturist and Certified Veterinary Chiropractor, she also incorporates homeopathy into her practice, Harmany Equine Clinic, based in Flint Hill, Virginia. Dr. Harman was the first veterinarian to acquire a computerized saddle-fitting device, which gives a color scan of the pressure points under a saddle while the horse is being ridden. She is the author of *The Horse's Pain-Free Back and Saddle-Fit Book*.

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