

What To Do If Your Horse Doesn't Like The Bit

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There are so many bits and bridles to choose from it can be a very difficult and confusing area for many people. The first thing of which to be aware is that the key ingredient to success is time, and plenty of it!

Many behavioral problems seen in young horses can be traced to a simple pain response to a poorly-fitting or badly-used bit. Firstly you should check that there is no problem with the horses mouth. It never does harm to get your nearest vet or horse dentist to give your horse a once over.

The soft tissue in a horse's mouth gets very easily damaged and one of the most common causes of pain in a horses mouth is that caused sharp or uneven teeth. Young horses should, in any case, have their teeth checked every six months (and older horses once a year) by a professional. A dentist or vet will rasp spurs and spikes which develop on growing teeth down to a smooth, comfortable surface. This is especially important when starting to use a bit, when the horse's cheeks can be pressed against his teeth by the bit rings.

With so many different bits to choose from and so many conflicting opinions on this subject, it is almost impossible to decide on the right bit, although there are some points to consider.

Firstly, straight-bar bits are more gentle than jointed bits. Rubber bits are very kind, but many young horses love to chew them and they often don't last very long! Rubber bits also tend to be thick, and sit less happily in a young horse's mouth

If your horse has particularly short teeth, it may be necessary to use a really thin bit, such as a bradoon, to begin with, so that he doesn't get

uncomfortable: but such a bit should never be used to ride with, as thin bits are far harsher in action than thicker ones. As your horse's teeth grow, and certainly before you start to ride him, you can move to a snaffle bit with a thicker mouthpiece.

Nylon can be just as easily marked and damaged as rubber, so consider plastic or plastic-coated bits even those coated in plastic and flavoured with apple (known as Happy-Mouth bits)

So-called mouthing bits, with keys, rolling bars or other attachments to encourage the horse to "play" with the bit in his mouth, are fine to use although difficult to find in any material except metal, so they tend to be heavy and quite harsh for young mouths

Fitting a bit is extremely important. Too narrow, and it pinches; too wide, and the bit can slip from side to side in the horse's mouth. When you look at a straight bit, the rings should be free of each side of the mouth by about a quarter of an inch (1cm). With a jointed bit, you will have to pull the rings down while attached to the bridle (once it is on the horse) to straighten out the bit before you can judge it.

The height of the bit in the mouth is also very important: too high, and it pulls the lips back painfully; too low, and the bit knocks against the front teeth. When the bit rests in the mouth attached to a bridle, pull it down firmly by both rings. The bit should touch the corners of the mouth without wrinkling them. When the bit is released, the corners of the mouth should be wrinkled, but not pulled back.

The methods for introducing a bit for the first time vary enormously, but the main thing to remember is that the more gentle you are, and the slower you take things, the less likely your horse is to associate his first experience of this strange object with discomfort or fear.

Some coat the bit mouthpiece with honey or other flavored coatings to help with acceptance:— but takes you back to square one when you need to put the

bit in without any flavoring. So this might work for you, but be aware of the consequences.

The best time to start to introduce the bit is after your horse's feed, when he is generally contented and calm, and there is little else going on in the yard to distract him. Begin by rubbing the horse all over his head, and particularly over the poll area behind his ears. He should be used to you handling him around his head in any case through earlier training, but if not get him used to your hands around his head first, before introducing the bit.

Gently and slowly, lift the bridle and slip the headpiece over his head. Praise him for standing quietly. If he should show signs of alarm, stop, take the bridle away, wait until he has calmed down and try again. Keep trying patiently until he gets more used to it and accepts it, praising him every time he stays still and never losing your temper.

It helps in getting the bit into the horse's mouth, to stand facing the same way as the horse and gently hold his head, about halfway down, with your right hand and forearm hooked over his nose. This holds his head in place and ensures he cannot jerk upwards and hurt his mouth.

Now for the fiddly bit! With the fingers of your left hand, get hold of the mouthpiece of the bit loosely and bring it in front of his mouth. With your hand cupped under his chin, insert your left thumb into his mouth gently at the corner, as you would to put a bridle on any adult horse. Move it around gently in the natural gap between his teeth, and eventually he will open his mouth. Quickly but smoothly, slip the bit in and move it up so that the left ring now rests at the corner of his mouth, in the normal position.

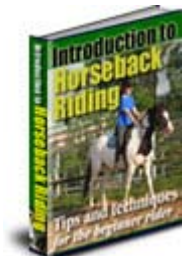
If you find this difficult to do first time, don't worry – just try again. So long as you keep your own patience, stay calm and do things slowly, your horse will wait for you.

You'll also need to check the cheekpiece fittings again: if they're too long or too short, simply take the bridle off again and adjust. It will not do the horse

any harm to "practice" having the bridle and bit put on a few times, although don't overdo it or you may find your horse getting irritated.

The first time, leave the bridle on with the bit in for about half an hour, staying close and making a fuss of the horse. You will find that he will toss his head, open his mouth wide, stick his tongue out, try to bite the bit – in fact everything he can to let you know that this is a really strange thing in his mouth! Don't worry – he will get used to it and settle down in time. After half an hour, even if he is still fooling around with it, slip the bridle off gently and without fuss, taking special care to avoid the bit hitting his teeth on the way out.

It is worth repeating this process about three times a week, until your horse is happily accepting the bit and staying calm. With good preparation and care, you will have a horse who will happily accept bit and bridle every day of his life, without complaint, trusting you and willing to go forward with you to the next step.



Roger Bourdon is the author of "Introduction to Horseback Riding" and owner of the site www.anyhorsebackriding.com. If you are interested in horse riding, then sign up for Roger's free mini course and news letters at www.anyhorsebackriding.com