

EMA

Equine Massage Academy Ltd

Therapy Education Research

Girthiness in Horses – What Is The Real Issue?



When we think of girthiness, it's often brushed off as a behavioural quirk—
“He’s just grumpy when being tacked up” or “She’s always been like that.”

But girthiness is not normal behaviour. It’s communication.

And more often than not, it's your horse telling you something doesn't feel right—sometimes in ways that go far beyond just the girth area.

The signs can be a subtle ears back from a full-on attempt to bite.

1. Pain or Discomfort in the Girth Area

The most obvious place to start—but not always the full story.

Your horse may:

- Flinch when the girth is tightened
- Bite, kick, or threaten
- Hold their breath or inflate their belly

This can be linked to:

- Skin sensitivity or irritation
- Muscle soreness behind the elbow or even scar tissue in there
- Poor saddle or girth fit

But remember—this is often just the surface-level symptom, not the root cause.

2. Saddle Fit Issues

A poorly fitting saddle is one of the most common contributors to girthing.

If your horse associates tacking up with discomfort, they will react before you even get on.

Look for:

- Uneven pressure through the panels
- Pinching behind the shoulders
- Bridging or rocking

This creates:

- Anticipation of pain
- Protective behaviour during girthing

Your horse isn't being difficult—they're preparing for discomfort.

3. Muscular Pain and Restriction

The girth area sits over key muscle groups involved in movement and posture.

If these muscles are sore or tight, girthing becomes uncomfortable.

This may be linked to:

- Overwork or incorrect workload
- Compensation from other issues
- Poor posture or lack of core engagement

You might also notice:

- Shortened stride

- Reluctance to move forward
- Difficulty working over the back
- Not lifting front limbs correctly when jumping

4. Rib, Thoracic, or Spinal Restriction

Restrictions through the ribcage or thoracic sling can make girthing feel restrictive or even painful.

Your horse may:

- React when touched around the ribs
- Struggle with bending or flexion
- Feel tight or uneven under saddle

This type of restriction often develops gradually and can be easily missed.

5. Learned Association (But Still for a Reason)

Sometimes girthing becomes a learned response—but it always starts somewhere.

If a horse has experienced discomfort repeatedly:

- They begin to anticipate it
- The reaction becomes quicker or more dramatic
- It can happen even before the girth is tightened

Important:

Even if it looks behavioural now—it originated from discomfort.

6. Gastric Ulcers & Gut Discomfort

This is a BIG one—and very commonly overlooked.

The girth sits directly over the ribcage... right where the stomach lies.

Horses with gut issues may:

- React strongly to girthing
- Be sensitive to brushing in that area
- Show mood changes or irritability
- Have inconsistent performance

Underlying causes may include:

- Gastric ulcers or Squamous ulcers
- Hindgut imbalance
- Poor feeding routines
- Stress

This is where girthing becomes more than just a tack issue—it becomes a whole-horse health issue.

7. Stress and Tension

Some horses hold tension through their body, especially around the girth area.

This can be influenced by:

- Environment
- Training pressure
- Previous experiences

A tense horse:

- Braces through the ribcage
- Holds the breath
- Becomes reactive during girthing

Again—this is communication, not attitude.

Why Girthiness Matters?

Girthiness is often one of the earliest warning signs that something isn't right.

Ignoring it can lead to:

- Escalating behavioural issues
- Reduced performance
- Chronic pain patterns
- More serious health conditions

But when you listen early, you can:

- Identify the root cause
- Improve your horse's comfort
- Prevent long-term problems

What You Can Do?

Start observing with curiosity—not assumption:

- When did this start?
- Has it gradually worsened?
- Is it consistent or does it vary day to day?
- Are there other subtle signs alongside it?

Look beyond the girth area and ask:

“What is my horse trying to tell me?”

Want to Go Deeper?

Understanding girthiness is just the beginning.

Inside our bit size, no work, full of information courses, we help you:

- Identify the real cause behind behaviours like girthiness
- Understand how the body, saddle, and internal health all connect
- Take practical steps to improve comfort, performance, and wellbeing

Because many cases of girthiness are not just about tack...
They're linked to something deeper—often the gut.

- **Optimising Gut Health and Colic Prevention** (essential if your horse shows girthiness) [LINK](#)
- **Empowering Equestrians with Saddle Assessment Skills** (so you can keep on top of your saddle fit and horse's comfort) [LINK](#)
- **Equine Massage for Horse Owners** (learn to palpate and assess and help if girthiness is muscle related) [LINK](#)

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Learn to Listen to Your Horse!

The signs are always there—Sometimes subtle, sometimes louder.

Girthiness is not just a moment during tacking up...It's a message.

And when you understand what's behind it, you can change everything for your horse.

Our courses are approved by:

