

We know it's tempting to buy the prettiest, coolest looking bit that jumps out at you when you're looking at the bit wall in your local tack store. But did you know that the type of bit, mouthpiece and shanks serve different purposes on your horse?

On the surface, bits may seem pretty cut and dry, but when you start digging deeper, you will realize that there is a science behind them and their functions. It is important to remember as you read through our information and do further research on your own that there are varying opinions on the uses of certain types of bits as well as different training methods. We recommend you find the bit that works well and is comfortable for both you and your horse. Any bit in the wrong hands can do damage to a horse's mouth. Finding the right bit may require some trial and error, so it is best to start with the least severe bit possible.

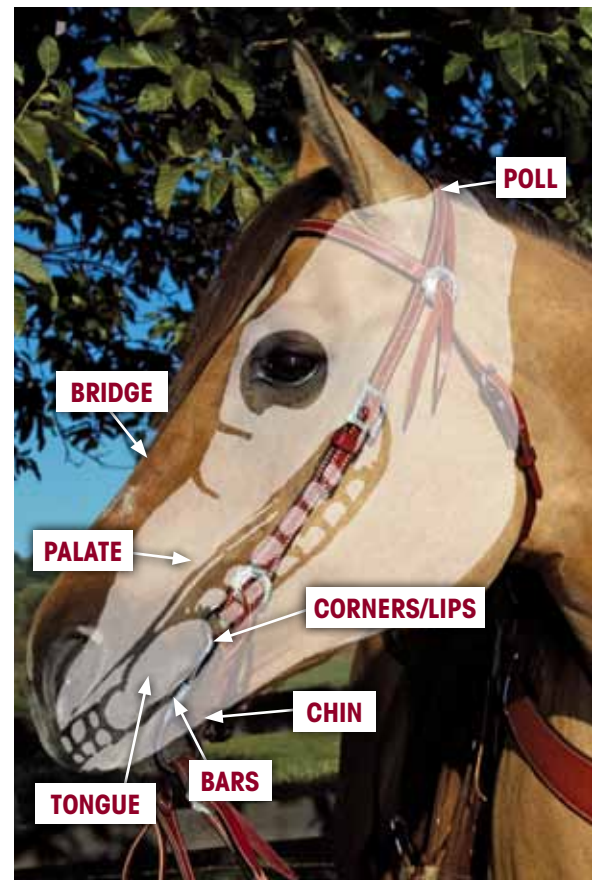
Bits are available in a wide selection of styles to meet a variety of needs and the options can be overwhelming. Bits are a communication tool intended to work with your body's cues as you direct your horse. If you're looking for a bit to solve your horse's behavioral problems, we recommend consulting a trainer instead. No bit can fix everything and there is no one bit that works well for every horse.

Please use the information here, and advice from a trainer, to choose the right bit for you and your horse.

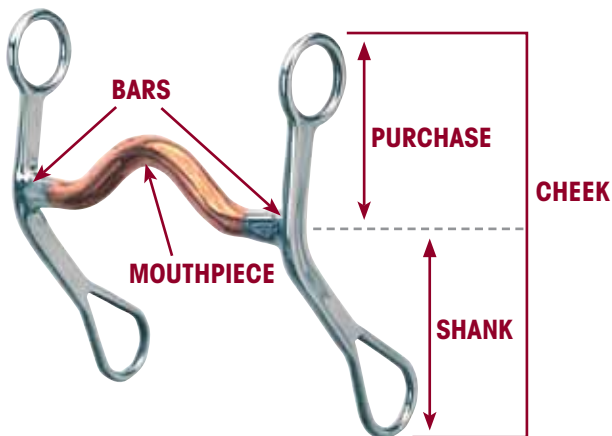
Bit Pressure Points

Horses innately move away from pressure, so every bit is designed to get a different reaction from a horse. When using a snaffle, for example, if you pull the left rein to the side, your horse will feel pressure from the right ring on the right side of his mouth, causing him to turn his head left, away from the pressure. The different pressure points are as follows:

- **BRIDGE OF NOSE** - the area roughly 4" from the top of the nasal cavity. It is the gristly part of the nose.
- **CHIN** - the groove behind a horse's chin. Pressure is applied with the use of a curb strap. Types of curb straps are explained in the Curb/Leverage Bit section.
- **CORNERS OF MOUTH/LIPS** - the area where the bottom and top lips meet. It used to be common practice to have two wrinkles in the corners of the mouth when biting, but current practice calls for none or one slight wrinkle so the bit hangs correctly in the mouth without hitting any teeth on either side of the bars.
- **BARS** - the gap between a horse's incisors in the front and premolars in the back.
- **ROOF OF MOUTH/PALATE** - the area at the top of the horse's mouth. The height and shape of the palate can vary from horse to horse.
- **POLL** - the point at the top of the head where it meets the neck.
- **TONGUE** - some horses have thick tongues and others have thinner tongues, so it is important to keep that in mind when selecting a bit. A low-ported bit may not provide enough tongue relief to a horse that has a thicker tongue.



Parts of a Bit



- **PURCHASE** - The part of the bit that is located above the mouthpiece. With a short purchase, the bit will act quicker in a horse's mouth when the rider pulls on the reins. With a long purchase, the bit is slower to react and works more on the poll.
- **SHANK** - The part of the bit that is located below the mouthpiece. It will give you leverage on the mouthpiece. The shorter the shank, the softer it is. The longer the shank, the more control you have.
- **CHEEKS** - This refers to the sides of the bit. The cheek includes both the purchase and the shank.
- **MOUTHPIECE** - The mouthpiece goes in the horse's mouth, across and on top of the tongue.
- **BARS** - The bars of a bit rest on the bars of the horse's mouth. The closer together the bars of the bit are, the more pressure is applied to the bars of the horse's mouth.

Types of Mouthpiece Metal



SWEET IRON

Sweet iron is intended to rust. It produces a sweet taste as rusting occurs to promote salivation.



COPPER

Copper causes a horse's mouth to salivate. This allows the mouth to stay soft and useable to the rider.



COPPER INLAY

Like copper, a copper inlay encourages salivation and is often found on a sweet iron or stainless steel mouthpiece.



STAINLESS STEEL

Stainless steel provides superior strength and a clean, neat look to any mouthpiece. A solid stainless steel mouthpiece, however, does not promote salivation and is best for horses with a consistently moist mouth. Stainless steel mouthpieces are available with copper inlays.

Common Mouthpieces

When it comes to mouthpieces, a general rule of thumb to follow is that the thicker the mouthpiece, the gentler it will be on your horse's mouth. A thinner mouthpiece is more severe because the pressure it applies is focused on a smaller area on the tongue and bars. Remember, even the mildest mouthpiece can be damaging to a horse's mouth in the wrong hands.

SMOOTH-MOUTH SNAFFLE

Typically broken in the middle, this mild mouthpiece is gentle on your horse and helps to keep its mouth soft and responsive. It works on the corners of the mouth and the bars.

THREE-PIECE SNAFFLE MOUTH

This mild mouthpiece is broken in two places which adds tongue pressure and allows the bit to work on the outside corners of the bars.

TWISTED WIRE SNAFFLE MOUTH

Typically considered a mouthpiece with more authority, this should be used only in experienced hands. The twist creates rigid edges that can damage a horse's mouth in the wrong hands. In the right hands, it can sharpen a horse's responsiveness. We recommend this mouthpiece only be used by more advanced riders.

SOLID MOUTH

The firm feel of this type of mouthpiece allows more pressure to be applied to the tongue and bars than that of a broken mouthpiece. Be sure to find the right port that allows enough tongue relief for your horse.

CORRECTION MOUTH

Even though "correction" sounds like this could be harsh, the jointed action on these mouthpieces actually makes them milder than a solid mouth bit and allows your horse to feel signals before the bit completely engages. The port on correction mouthpieces is designed to provide tongue relief and work on the palate.

Types of Bits

Generally speaking, bits can be classified into three main categories, **snaffle**, **curb/leverage** and **hackamore** and are designed to work on different pressure points.

Snaffle Bits

By definition a snaffle bit is a direct pull or direct action bit, meaning that when you are holding the reins in two hands atop your horse, you have direct contact with its mouth. Whatever you do with your hands, your horse should do. For example, when you move your hand to the left, your horse will feel that cue and realize that you want him to go that way.

Most trainers will start a young horse in a snaffle to gain the framework it needs to transition to a curb bit. Such a foundation includes lateral flexion, collection, transitions, responsiveness to leg cues and more. Again, this depends on the method of training the trainer uses. In the vaquero tradition of training, for example, horses are typically started in a bosal hackamore.

Best if used with an all leather curb strap to prevent the bit from pulling through the horse's mouth, O-ring and offset D-ring snaffles are great bits for starting young colts, training exercises, introducing a new riding discipline or softening an older, more seasoned horse's mouth.

TYPES OF SNAFFLES (snaffles are usually a matter of preference):



❶ O-RING SNAFFLE

These very mild, functional bits are typically available with smooth or twisted wire broken mouthpieces. The mouthpiece slides up and down the rings and moves independently of the rings, meaning that your horse can feel the movement caused by even a subtle rein cue. This type of snaffle helps keep the mouth soft and your horse responsive. Works on the bars, corners of the mouth and tongue.



❷ OFFSET D-RING SNAFFLE

Offset refers to the fixed position of the rings and how they connect to the mouthpiece. The straight side of the D-ring connected to the mouthpiece is designed to help prevent the bit from pulling through the mouth and to eliminate any pinching. The rings and mouthpiece also work independently of each other on this bit, making this mild bit great for starting or re-schooling a horse. Works on the bars, corners of the mouth and tongue.



❸ FULL CHEEK SNAFFLE

Typically seen in English disciplines, the full cheeks on this bit are designed to help prevent the bit from pulling through the mouth. Works on the bars, corners of the mouth and tongue (can also work on the poll when bit loops are used with a bridle).



❹ D-RING SNAFFLE

The rings on this bit help prevent it from pulling through the horse's mouth. Often seen in the English discipline but also used in western riding, it is another mild bit great for starting or re-schooling a horse. Works on the bars, corners of the mouth and tongue.



❺ EGG BUTT SNAFFLE

Another bit commonly used for English riding, the name refers to the shape of the ring. It can come in either a straight or broken mouthpiece and is designed to prevent pinching of the horse's mouth. Works on the poll and bars of the mouth.

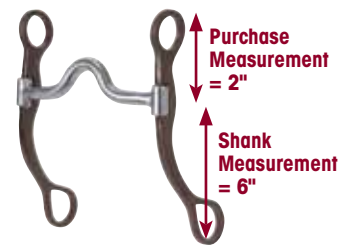
Curb/Leverage Bits

Curb bits are leverage bits that are generally used on more seasoned, finished horses and when riding with one hand. There are a wide variety of curb bits with different mouthpieces, different cheeks and different lengths of shanks. They work on the tongue, bars of the mouth, palate, corners of the mouth and under the chin (with the use of a curb strap). Comfort is key when choosing any bit for your horse.

The longer the shank is on the bit, the more leverage you have when the reins are pulled. At the same time, the horse is also rewarded quicker when the pressure from the reins is released. A curb bit with a shorter shank, however, will not have as much leverage and is slower to reward your horse with the release of pressure.

The amount of pressure applied by a curb bit is determined by a leverage ratio. To determine the ratio, measure from the middle of the side of the mouthpiece to the inside of the top ring where the headstall connects. This is the purchase measurement. Then, measure from the middle of the mouthpiece to the point on the bottom ring where the reins connect. This is the shank measurement. Next, divide the smaller of the two numbers into the larger to get the ratio. If, for example, the purchase measures 2" and the shank measures 6", the leverage ratio would be 3:1. This means that your horse will feel 3 pounds of pressure for every pound of pressure you apply to the bit with your hands. The higher the ratio, the more severe the bit will be.

LEVERAGE RATIO EXAMPLE



$2/6 = 3/1 = 3:1$ Leverage Ratio

COMMON TYPES OF CURB BITS

The general purpose bits pictured below feature 7" loose cheeks with curved grazing shanks that offer you the flexibility of a mild to moderately leveraged bit for great control on a seasoned horse. The loose cheeks leave a door open for your horse to feel the signal coming before the curb strap engages.

These are great bits for performance, competition, trail and everyday riding. Remember, any bit in the wrong hands can be dangerous. The proper bit should be selected based on the horse AND the rider. Another important thing to keep in mind is that a thinner mouthpiece will not be as gentle as a thicker one and has the potential to bruise your horse's mouth. The following are just a sampling of the wide array of mouthpieces available.



❶ 5" SWEET IRON SNAFFLE MOUTH WITH COPPER INLAY

This smooth, mild snaffle mouth is gentle on your horse and is designed to work on the tongue, bars and corners of the mouth.

❷ 5" SWEET IRON PORTED MOUTH WITH COPPER CRICKET AND INLAY

Designed with a cricket to keep the jaw relaxed or to pacify a nervous horse, this bit works on the tongue, bars, palate and chin.

❸ 5" MEDIUM PORT MOUTH WITH COPPER INLAY

This bit provides a moderate amount of tongue relief as it works on the corners of the mouth, tongue, bars and palate.

❹ 5" LOW PORT CORRECTION MOUTH WITH FLAT COPPER ROLLER BARS

Working on the bars, chin and palate, this bit provides ample tongue relief with its medium port.

Curb/Leverage Bits Cont.

CURB STRAPS

- A curb strap is an important piece of tack that applies pressure under the horse's chin to help with the leverage and timing of a curb bit.
- Like bits, the types of curb straps and chains vary. Single chain curbs apply more pressure than the double chain variety while an all leather curb strap tends to be the gentlest and supplest.
- A common rule of thumb to follow when adjusting curb straps is that you should be able to fit two fingers vertically between the strap and the chin groove.
- A looser curb strap or chain allows time for the horse to get the signal that pressure under its chin is coming. Riders who have quick hands or are prone to jerking would be better off using a looser chin strap. On the other hand, riders who have quiet, soft hands and great timing can get away with using a little bit tighter strap. When a rider has great timing, he will reward the horse by releasing pressure the instant his horse performs the desired action.

Types of Curb Straps and Chains



4-1/2" SINGLE FLAT LINK CHAIN CURB STRAP



HEAVY-DUTY SINGLE LINK CHAIN CURB STRAP



DOUBLE FLAT LINK CHAIN CURB STRAP



FLAT LEATHER CURB STRAP

TYPES OF CHEEKS

There is a vast array of bits on the market today and it can be very confusing trying to decide what will work best for you and your horse. Weaver Leather has various types of cheeks available on our curb bits. Cheeks include the purchase and the shanks.



1 SHANK BITS WITH 8" CHEEKS

Designed for showing or for more seasoned, older horses, the longer shanks on these moderate to high leverage bits provide a faster response from the rider's hand to the horse's mouth as well as a quicker reward when pressure is released. As with any bit, the quieter the hands, the less severe the bit will be.



2 SHANK BITS WITH 7" CHEEKS

The curved grazing design of these shanks offers the rider the flexibility of a mild to moderately leveraged bit, providing great control. These are probably the most versatile, well-rounded type of shanks offered to both horse and rider, making them great for a variety of disciplines from performance and competition to trail and everyday riding.



3 ARGENTINE BITS

These low leverage training bits are commonly used as a transition bit from a ring snaffle to a fuller shank bit and can be used by any level of rider needing a softer feel. Designed to be used with a curb strap, these bits help introduce young horses to curb pressure. Reins can also be placed in the ring located near the middle of the cheek for more direct action on the corners of the horse's mouth, like a snaffle.



4 GRAZING SHANKS/CHEEKS

The cheeks on these bits are fixed (not broken or flexible) and the shanks curve backward to provide mild leverage. The greater the curve of the shank, the more delayed the signal time is to the horse, which makes this style of cheek a popular choice with novice riders on trained horses.



5 "S" SHANK BITS

An "S" shank design is great for horses that are prone to lipping the shank. Our moderately leveraged "S" Shank bits use mouthpieces that are great for performance horses in speed events where lift and quicker response are needed.



6 GAG & WONDER BITS

Depending on the degree of slide on the gag, these bits aid in lifting the shoulders, allow more flex for turning and provide more control at a higher rate of speed, making them popular for barrel racing and other speed events. The action of these bits works off the top of the poll to create softness and should be used with a loose chain curb.

HACKAMORES

A hackamore may look relatively simple in its construction of a noseband connected to a headstall and reins; however, to control a horse without a mouthpiece takes patience and training. Hackamores were introduced to America in the early 1800s by Spanish vaqueros. Since then, many trainers have found great value in implementing hackamores into their training regimens. Some trainers may start young horses in a hackamore while others may introduce the hackamore after starting a horse off in a snaffle. Again, it is a matter of preference. Bosal and mechanical hackamores are often also used on older horses, bit-sour horses or horses with damaged bars and/or tongues.

Proper placement is important when fitting a hackamore. Adjusted too low, it will hinder the horse's breathing. It should sit on the gristly part of your horse's nose, approximately 4" from the top of the nasal cavity. Size of the hackamore is also important. The wider/thicker the nosepiece, the more pressure is dispersed, thereby making it gentler than a thinner nosepiece. There are two common types of hackamores used today:

BOSAL HACKAMORE - commonly used for training



- This type of hackamore consists of a bosal (braided noseband), headstall (bosal hanger) and, traditionally, horsehair reins called a mecate [muh-kah-tee]. Braided nylon mecate are also used, so it typically depends on preference. Bosal hackamores work on the bridge of the nose, the sensitive tissue along the nose and the chin.
- Bosal hackamores can teach a horse to be softer in the face and carry itself so its poll, spine and body are balanced. When you pick up on the mecate, the sensitive nerves in the soft tissue on either side of the nose are lightly squeezed to achieve the desired pressure and results.

MECHANICAL HACKAMORE - commonly used in trail riding, team roping and other speed events



- Mechanical hackamores work off of leverage via a noseband, curb strap/chain and shanks. As with curb bits, the longer the shanks, the more leverage you will have. These hackamores work on the nose, chin, lower jaw and the poll.

COMMON BIT QUESTIONS

Where does the bit fit in a horse's mouth?

Bits are designed to fit with the mouthpiece across and on top of the tongue and resting on the bars of the mouth between the incisors (front teeth) and premolars (back teeth).

What is the standard size mouthpiece for a horse?

Mouthpieces measuring 5" are the standard for most horses, while the standard for ponies is 4-1/2". Draft horses normally take a 6"-6-1/2" mouthpiece.

How do I know which bit is the right one for my horse?

Every horse is different and so is every rider. Biting a horse properly is a combination of matching up the bit with both your horse AND how you control your hands. If your horse is tossing his head a lot, for example, it could be a result of how hard you are pulling on the reins combined with the bit working too much on his palate or pinching. The bit could also be putting too much pressure on your horse's bars, which can cause discomfort. These are just a couple examples, but there are a many factors that go into choosing the right bit. We encourage you to read our complete Bitology section to gain a general understanding of bits or contact a trusted trainer in your area if you are having trouble finding the right bit that works well for both you and your horse.

What are the long term consequences of using an incorrect or too severe bit on my horse?

Eventually, you will end up damaging the bars, tongue or palate of your horse's mouth which can deaden the nerves. If that happens, you will never again be able to rely on a bit that's designed to specifically work on those areas of the mouth. A damaged mouth is one reason people go to hackamores down the road. One thing to always keep in mind is the quieter your hands, the less severe any bit will be. We recommend asking your trainer or a trusted trainer in your area about what bit you should change to.

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