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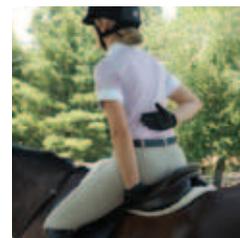
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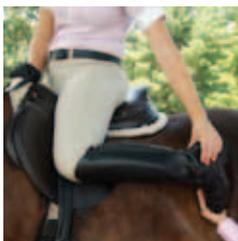
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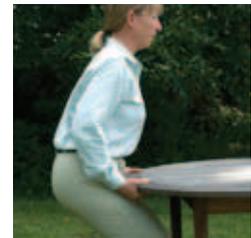
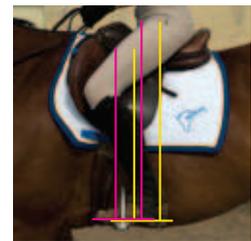
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# Establish a Solid Thigh Contact



**Training Aids:**  
Pillow or small  
exercise ball

**Use this 5-Minute Fix to establish good thigh contact. Resting your thighs on the saddle gives you a solid base of support over fences and distributes your weight around the horse's sides.**

## When riding do you:

- Grab onto your horse with your calves?
- Feel insecure over fences?
- Struggle to stay out of the saddle in jumping position?

The solution may be to establish good thigh contact.

Next time you ride, pay attention to your thighs. Are they close to the saddle, or are your knees turned out? Is there a gap between your knee and the saddle flap? Do your knees ride forward over the knee roll? Does it feel as if your thighs are being “pushed” out by the saddle or the horse? Can someone see daylight between your thighs and the saddle over fences?

First take a moment to assess how well your saddle fits you. Your saddle has a tremendous influence on the way your thighs rest on your horse. When

the saddle is too small, the knee rolls are incorrectly placed, or the seat is too wide (as in some treeless saddles), you will have difficulty getting your thigh to lie flat. When the saddle is too large, the stirrup bars are placed too far forward, or you ride with a hollowed back, you will grip with your thighs in an attempt to feel secure.

If your saddle is a problem, it needs to be addressed. You want to feel secure over fences so that you don't have to resort to gripping, which, of course, interferes with your horse's ability to jump (see Fixes 35, 36, and 37).

## The Femur Gives You Skeletal Support

The three primary bones of your seat are your pelvis and two femurs (thigh bones). These three form what is known as the “fork” of the seat. In *full seat* all three are in contact with the saddle, with primarily the thighs in contact when jumping. A correct leg position is often referred to as “the flat of the thigh” on the horse. This position of the femur distributes your weight around the horse’s sides through the saddle (fig. 11.1). However, when the *back* of the thigh is in contact (and knees are turned out) the femur is not positioned to transmit your weight to the horse’s sides. You have to compensate by resorting to other less-effective solutions, such as gripping with the back of your calf (fig.11.2).

1. To feel what good thigh support is like, make an upside-down “V” with your index and middle finger to simulate your femurs.
2. Place them over your other forearm, which simulates the horse’s barrel. Feel how the “V” shape will only go down so far supporting the weight of your hand on the sides of your forearm. This is how your thigh transmits your weight to the horse’s sides, thus alleviating pressure on his back (fig. 11.3 A).
3. But when you widen your fingers (i.e. turn your knees out), you eliminate that thigh support (fig. 11.3 B).



**Fig. 11.1** The flat part of this rider’s thigh is against the saddle.



**Fig. 11.2** An extreme turnout of the thigh, as evidenced by daylight visible between the rider’s thigh and the saddle. Only the lower part of her calf is on the horse’s side.

4. And when you *pinch* your fingers (i.e. gripping with your knees), you restrict your hips and pinch yourself *off* the saddle (fig. 11.3 C).

The saddle should fit between the horse and rider, marrying the more rounded shape of the horse with the upside-down “V” of the rider’s pelvis and thighs without interfering with the rider’s hips or the horse’s back.



**Figs. 11.3 A–C** I have made an upside down “V” with the index and middle finger of one hand and rested it on my other forearm to represent my two thighs on the saddle in jumping position (A). If I take my “thighs” off, I have no contact (B). And if I grip with my “thighs,” I pinch my fingers upward, off my forearm (C).

Sitting in *full seat* with your thighs flat against your saddle, your weight is distributed across your seat and along the horse’s back over the rib cage. Spreading your weight over a larger surface area like this decreases pressure on the horse’s back in any one place.

When your thigh is flat (provided your saddle fits), the area at its top rests—not gripping—along the twist of the seat. This support of the upper thigh protects the front of your pelvis from getting bumped into the pommel. But when your knees turn out, your thigh no longer rests along the twist, so there is little to stop you from banging into the pommel, and when the saddle is too small—or the twist is too wide—you may not be able to avoid hitting in front.

If this happens, first check your stirrup length (see Fix 14). Shortening a hole or two can make a world of difference, but it does send your seat toward the back of the saddle, so be sure the seat size is big enough. If not, your buttocks will ride up the cantle and cause your pelvis to tip forward and down,

hollowing your lower back. This can create excessive pressure on the horse’s back under the cantle area.

A well-fitting saddle is also important for your comfort in the pelvic area. If you are getting hurt there, you need to re-evaluate the saddle and the way you sit in it. When your thigh lies flat (correctly) on the saddle, the femur becomes a structural support for your stability without you having to brace your legs. This minimizes the amount of muscular



**Fig. 11.4** With the knee turned out like this, all of a rider’s weight is on the stirrups.

**Fig. 11.5**

Pinching with the knees over a jump.



effort needed to properly adhere to the saddle—and horse.

Jumping with your knees turned out places your weight largely on the stirrups. This concentrates the pressure onto the area of the stirrup bars on the horse's back. Even if you grip with the back of your calf you are subject to the stirrup's pendulum effect, which is very unstable (fig. 11.4).

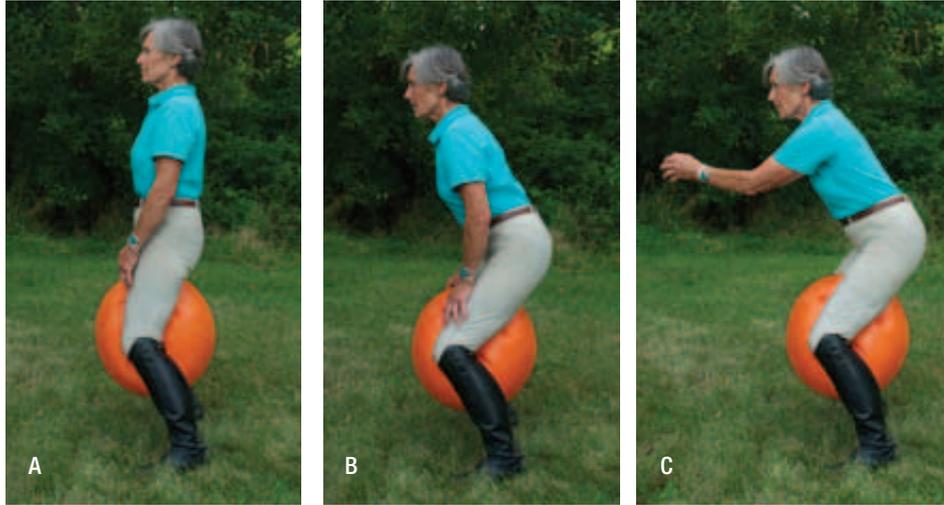
Pinching or gripping with your knees minimizes the surface area over which your weight is distributed to just your knees, and takes a lot of muscular effort (fig. 11.5). Pinching can cause knee rubs, limit your ability to follow the horse's motion, and restrict the horse's breathing since you are essentially squeezing his rib cage. Can you imagine what it would be like to have someone constantly gripping your ribs? Pinching also causes your knee to act as a pivot point around which your

upper body and lower leg swing forward and back. Instead of absorbing the jump with flexible hips, knees, and ankles, your upper body rotates over your knee. This causes your lower leg to flip backward no matter how much weight you try to put into your heels. (A jumping saddle that is too small for you, or doesn't fit well in other aspects, can also cause the lower leg to swing back—see Fix 36.)

## EXERCISE

### *On the Ground*

- 1.** Take a small, underinflated exercise ball or pillow and place it between your inner thighs. Turn your knees out. What happens to the ball? Most likely it drops to the ground unless you catch it with your calves.
- 2.** Place the ball between your thighs again and pinch with your knees. Notice how it bulges out behind you. If you combine this with leaning forward in your jumping position, you will make it difficult for your horse to move freely and be in front of your leg.
- 3.** Put the flat of your thighs on the ball with your feet parallel to each other. Notice how this position holds the ball without much effort. Flatten your back and feel how your hips sink back slightly,



**Figs. 11.6 A–C** Viewed from the side, Fran has the flat of her thigh on the ball with her back flat in the full seat and the jumping position (A & B). She can easily extend her arms without gripping or losing her balance (C).

which moves the ball slightly forward. Your legs are firm but not gripping and sending the ball (horse) forward.

**4.** Fold into jumping position from the hips. Notice that the ball remains firmly between your legs without gripping. You can easily extend your arms to follow your horse's mouth over a jump (figs. 11.6 A–C).

## EXERCISE

### *On the Horse*

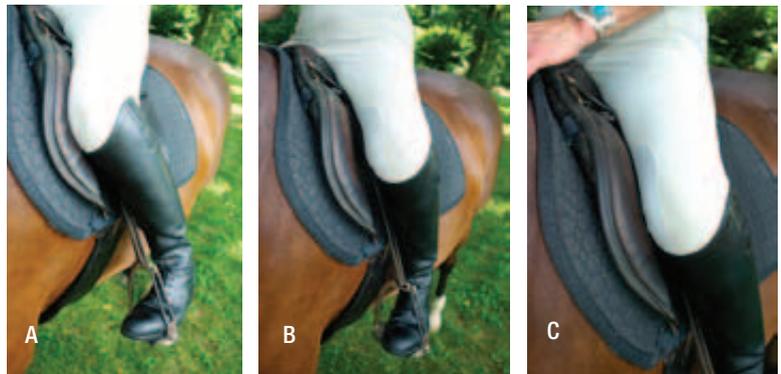
**1.** Standing still, experiment with different thigh positions: First, pinching with your knees (internal rotation); then turning your knees out (external rotation) with knees off and feet pointing away from the horse; and lastly, neutral, with your knee and thigh resting flat on the saddle (no rotation

in the hip—figs. 11.7 A–C). Notice that you have to grip with your inner thighs in order to pinch with your knees, and tighten your buttocks in order to turn your knees out.

**2.** Rest the flat of your thigh on the saddle. Relax your buttocks and inner-thigh muscles so that the femur is in a neutral

### **Figs. 11.7 A–C**

The knee is gripping (A); knee is turned out (B); knee and thigh are in a good position: note the thigh's even contact with the saddle (C).



position, between internal and external rotation. How much of your inner thigh touches the horse? Do you have contact along the entire length or only at the top and bottom? If there is a gap, see Fix 31 in my book *50 5-Minute Fixes to Improve Your Riding*.

**3.** Have an assistant slide her hand along the inside of your thigh. There should be contact the whole way—like a well-fitting glove (fig. 11.8).

**4.** Pinch your knee and then turn your knee out while her hand is there so you both can feel the difference in the way the femur lies against the saddle. It is too tight when pinching, and there is no contact when your knee is turned out.

**Fig. 11.8** An assistant checks for an even contact with the saddle along the entire length of the thigh.



**5.** Go back to your old thigh position and feel how the contact changes. Do you tense in the buttocks or inner thighs? Does your thigh contact move to the front or back? Rotate your hip until the flat of the thigh is on again. Remember the feeling of the ground exercise with the exercise ball between your legs as you ask your horse to walk forward. Sense how your seat can move forward with your

horse, and how your weight is distributed along the inside of your femurs.

**6.** Walk, trot, and canter, experimenting with these three different positions of your femurs: knees pinching, knees off the saddle, and flat of your thighs on. Spend a minute or two in each position before changing it. Feel how your balance changes and how your horse's movement alters depending on the position of your thigh. Where do you feel most secure? Is it the position that gives your horse the most amount of freedom to move forward?

*Note:* If you have been riding with your knees *off* the saddle for a long time you may feel as if you are pinching when you have the flat of your thigh against it. However, when you have contact along the length of your thigh, you are not knee pinching: you have to squeeze with your knees to do this. (Recall the ball exercise above.) If you have been *gripping* for a long time this new position may feel loose. Give it some time and pay attention to your horse to see how he changes his way of going when you have thigh support without squeezing.

**7.** Once you can maintain your inner thigh on the saddle, ride over a few jumps. Notice that when your thigh is flat like this you are closer to the horse and you use less muscular effort to stay with him.