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Bit or Bitless Bridle? This Vet Says to Ask Your Horse

Every once in a while I'll see someone on a trail, riding his or her horse with a [bitless bridle](#), and I'm always curious. Why go bitless? Is it better for the horse? Do you have as much "stopping power" without a bit on your bridle?

The only bitless riding I do with my mare is toodling around the pasture every so often while she's wearing just a halter and lead rope, and she always does fine, but I also have the added confidence of the pasture fences and the fact that she knows I'm not going to ask for much there.

So I turned to an expert on the bitless bridle, Dr. Robert Cook, and he graciously agreed to share with us his point of view:

Bit or Bitless?

By Robert Cook

Would you like to improve your horse's quality of life and performance overnight and make riding and driving safer, more pleasurable and less expensive?

In the last 12 years, tens of thousands of horse owners have done that by [retiring a bitted bridle](#) and upgrading to the Dr.Cook BitlessBridle.™ You don't have to be brave to be bitless – just wise.

For steering, pressure and release on [one rein nudges](#) the opposite half of the head. For slowing or stopping, pressure on both reins hugs the whole of the head. Unlike a bit's painful focus, the pressure is well-distributed and painless. A strap on skin trumps metal on bone.

A horse knows when a fly lands on its face. For a rein-aid, the "whisper" of a touch by strap on skin is quite enough signal. A horse doesn't need to be "shouted at" via its super-sensitive oral cavity with a signal that so easily generates pain. Such a signal defeats its own object. A horse in pain is deaf to instruction. Too often, a bit signal is overkill and dangerous.

The deeply-embedded belief that a bit controls a horse is a myth. The ability to switch a horse instantly from a bitted bridle to the Dr.Cook BitlessBridle has revealed that the bit is the most common explanation for loss of control. Even now, when a safer, more effective and humane alternative to a bit is available, the myth survives like a fly in amber , because of a rule that has not been updated for nearly a century.



If you hurt a horse with a bit it doesn't scream. Instead, it shows its mental and respiratory distress by body language, before, during and after exercise. Six major categories are recognizable – [the six 'F's](#):

- Fear: nervousness, spookiness, hypersensitivity
- Flight: bolting, pulling, rushing the jumps
- Fight: bucking, rearing, resistance
- Freeze: refusal to go forward, refusing a jump, 'propping'
- Facial neuralgia: head tossing, head rubbing, loss of focus
- Physiological disarray: a bit triggers 'eat' responses (jaw and tongue movement, salivation and swallowing), interfering with 'exercise' responses that should be facilitating the dramatically increased demand for oxygen. Like us, horses cannot eat and exercise simultaneously.
- A bit causes well over 100 counterproductive behaviors and 40 diseases; many serious, some fatal and all of them expensive (read more [here](#)). In a review of [66 skulls](#), I found evidence of bit damage to bone or teeth in 88 percent (<http://www.bitlessbridle.com/DamageByTheBit.pdf>).
- The Dr.Cook BitlessBridle provides comprehensive communication and has no side effects. In a dressage test, comparing bitted with bitless, four riders – in their horse's first four bitless minutes – improved their scores by an average of 75 percent (<http://www.bitlessbridle.com/CHAexperiment.pdf>).
- Horses tell us that a painless and physiologically compatible rein-aid is effective and prevents a host of problems, diseases and accidents. We should not be hitting them in the mouth with steel rods. If FEI rules were written by horses, bits would be banned.
- Bits should be in museums, not mouths.

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