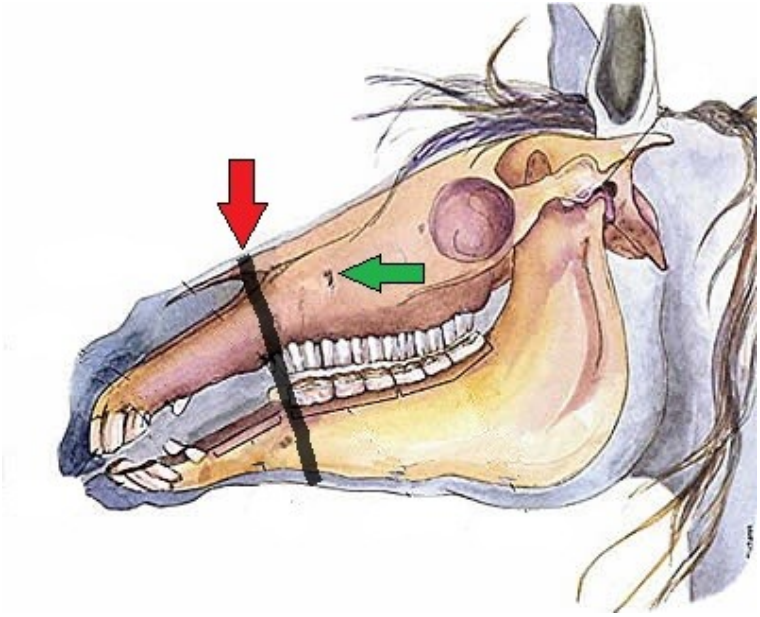
Choosing the best Bitless Bridle for your horse by Cynthia Cooper

Over the past 5 or 6 years bitless bridles have increased in popularity and so have the number of available designs.
Like bits, they can have very different actions and levels of comfort for the horse, so choosing a bitless bridle comes down to knowing how the designs work and what may be best for your individual horse.
In some cases, even the activity/event you participate in, will indicate a design that is more suited, eg. a rope bridle would not be accepted in the showring but it suits endurance and trail riding very well.
So first we need to know how bitless bridles work in general.
All bitless bridles apply pressure somewhere on the horse's head, and often in more than one place.
The top of the nose, side of the nose, cheeks, poll and under the jaw are the main areas contacted when a rider uses the rein, so lets look at the affect this has on the horse.

Top of the nose pressure is generally well accepted due to the training a horse receives in a halter, but great care must be taken to ensure the pressure is not applied too low on the nose or the fragile split nose bone can be damaged, and with severe actions (repeated downward jerking) possibly broken.
The nostrils can also be affected by a low noseband which in turn affects the horse's breathing ability.
As a general guide a noseband is best positioned above the area where soft tissue ends and hard bone can be felt around the entire nose. (top arrow). This is also in line with the start of the pre-molars and 3-4 fingers below the cheekbones (side arrow).



The type of material used on a bridle's noseband will indicate the degree of comfort for the horse – hard lariat type rope used on some sidepull designs, and thin materials like covered cable seen on some mechanical hackamores, and even the thin rope of a halter/hackamore can mark the horse's nose with prolonged use and/or the weight of heavy rope reins.
Thicker padded nosebands or covered nosebands offer a greater degree of comfort but can sometimes reduce responsiveness if a horse has learned to push against pressure, or the rider maintains constant contact allowing the horse to become dull to pressure.

The side of the nose usually receives directional pressure so it is important to consider what is contacting this area. Large pieces of metal seen in many of the leverage style bitless bridles can trap the skin and flesh of the cheek against the teeth if they have sharp points causing pain (example pictured right).
Even noseband knots on a rope bridle can have a similar affect if used harshly or positioned too high or low.

The cheeks receive some pressure more commonly in the crossunder styles, with minimal pressure in most other styles, but it is still important from a comfort perspective to be aware of things that can cause discomfort like bulky keepers, fancy knots and decorations.

The poll generally only receives a small amount of pressure on crossunder styles and more from some leverage styles in which case the type of material used can affect the horse's comfort. Care must be taken to ensure that thicker padded head pieces don't push into the back of the ears. Where there is no poll pressure action, the material thickness/padding is not so much of an issue when light reins are used.

Under the jaw pressure is generally seen in leverage bridles (that combine nose and jaw pressure) but can also come from tight nosebands and chinstraps. Because there is not a great deal of flesh covering the jaw bone, and the fact that the jawbone moves when a horse chews, care must be taken to ensure any material used is not abrasive or tight.

Leverage is applied by rein action causing a metal apparatus (eg. metal hackamore sides) to pressure the top of the nose and so the chinstrap or curb strap/chain will also apply pressure to the underside of the jaw.

Chinstraps that run freely through a ring can also provide leverage depending on the material used – stiffer materials such as leather (pictured right) and even rope (eg. Indian Bosal) will have a tightening and therefore leveraging effect, while softer, flatter materials such as webbing actually bend around the ring causing it to stop at the snug point (eg. LightRider bridle webbing chinstrap).

More photos detail on how each paticular style of bridle works is explained in a previous article I wrote – http://www.naturalhorseworld.com/BitlessBridles.htm#Difference.

To sum them up, the general categories of bitless bridles are:

- The Rope Halter/Natural Hackamore – uses nose pressure only.
- The Mechanical Hackamore – uses leverage over the nose and under the jaw.
- Other Leverage styles – use pressure over the nose and under the jaw.
- The Crossunder or Crossover – uses 'head hug' pressure on the nose, cheeks and poll.
- The Side Pull – uses pressure on the top and side of the nose.

In deciding which style will suit your horse' you also need to take the following into account:

Your horse's sensitivity: Is he/she a sensitive soul who reacts to pressure quickly, or a more stoic type who can even be immune to pressure at times?
Sensitive types generally prefer a looser fitting bridle (eg. Rope LightRider bridle pictured right) and respond to light pressure so a bridle that gives good release is their preference. They often cope with a rope halter/natural hackamore, mechanical hackamore used gently, and looser fitting side pull styles better than crossunder and tight leverage style bridles.

The more stoic, less responsive to pressure horses will cope with most styles of bridle but can ignore the pressure provided by a soft flat noseband, so a rope halter/natural hackamore, sidepull or crossunder style may be better for them.
If you have a horse who is less responsive to directional pressure, a mechanical hackamore and some leverage styles are probably not the best choice due to their diffculty in providing a stronger directional rein (relying on neck reining is not always foolproof).

Level of education: By rights a well educated horse should accept any type of bridle because it will be listening to seat and leg aids (and voice if you're driving) more so than the reins. However these horses often have past history that will dictate the comfort they are prepared to accept (or not!) - see next paragraph.
A young or green horse will generally do better with a sidepull style bridle and can have problems with mechanical hackamores and crossunder styles until their understanding of directional pressure is solid.

Past history with bridles can dictate what sort of pressure a horse will accept or not. Some horses who have not worn a bridle before will find closer and firmly fitted bridles a bother, preferring the more open, looser feel of a halter/natural hackamore.
If the horse has had some negative experiences with being trained in a tight noseband they will also prefer a looser fitted bridle, as will horses who have had facial injuries.
Horses who have learned to lean on or ignore pressure may need a bridle that can escalate the pressure such as the nose knots on rope halter/natural hackamores, a sidepull with a lariat noseband or other leverage styles.

Your desired activities can also come into consideration when choosing design and materials to suit. If you do a lot of trail or endurance riding, then a bridle you can also use to tie up safely and lead with is a big bonus. While rope halters/natural hackamores can be the most useful they can also mark the nose unless a noseband cover and lightweight reins are used.

If you ride in a club or show your horse, then a more traditional looking bridle will help you look the part.
(eg. LightRider Western Style pictured right).
If you do stockwork or use the bridle on a lot of different horses then choosing one that is flexible but will stand up to hard work is best.
If you prefer not to oil and clean a bridle regularly, or ride in water a lot, then a rope or or synthetic material like beta biothane is probably more practical.

Most importantly the horse's comfort should come first so it can do its job without the worry of ill fitting, tight tack or constant pressure from firm straps.
Horses need to move their jaw to chew, yawn, relax and even eat/drink with a bridle on so it makes sense to choose a bridle that allows this.

If in doubt, the old saying, 'Less is More' may well be a good rule to apply. Start with a simple design and see what your horse thinks. Most good retailers who have the welfare of the horse in mind will offer a money back guarantee if your horse isn't happy.

I hope this information has been helpful and that you enjoy your bitless bridle shopping.

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Photo below: LightRider Bitless Bridles in action.