

Horse sense



Horses used in hippotherapy are trained to ensure the safety of riders.

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How [hippotherapy can lead to improved balance, strength and flexibility](#)—and to a more positive outlook on life.

Hippotherapy involves specific training for the horses, too. “Safety, of course, is the No. 1 priority, followed closely by the need for the horse to use correct movement,” says Bethany Nugent, a physical therapist and manager at the Atlanta location of My Heroes, and the Georgia liaison for the [American Hippotherapy Association](#). “Straight, rhythmic stepping is critical.”

To achieve this, trainers often engage horses in lungeing or long lining, exercises that involve the horse walking in a large circle while on a lead of sorts, with the trainer standing in the center of the circle. Both activities teach the horse to respond to human commands and to learn new step techniques.

Hippotherapy horses also must be tolerant of clients using varied positions (for example, sitting backward or lying across the horse’s back), as well as to props and equipment commonly used during therapy sessions. The horse must also be comfortable having less “personal space,” as sessions typically involve at least two people walking alongside the animal. While the amount of time involved in training a horse for hippotherapy varies, Brent Applegate, owner of My Heroes, says staff usually knows within two or three weeks if a horse will qualify.