

"Hippo" comes from the Greek term meaning



horse, and therapy means treatment, so Hippotherapy means "Treatment with the help of the horse" - and hippopotamus means water horse.

Greenlock Therapeutic Riding Center is becoming a center that provides a lot of this therapy. We now employ Physical, Speech, and Occupational Therapists to assist with this endeavor.

Hippotherapy is a tool used by our therapists to improve a rider's movement control such as posture, mobility, balance, and coordination. In hippotherapy, the natural rhythmic movement of the horse is used to simulate the rider's automatic balance and postural responses. The walking horse causes the normal rider to react with movements at the trunk and hips that are very similar to normal human walking. Many people with abnormal movement never experience this pattern of movement on their own, so they do not know what walking "feels" like; the horse provides this.

At Greenlock, the therapist does an initial evaluation to determine the rider's abilities and needs. The rider with a disability may have abnormal muscle tension or tone, decreased joint flexibility, decreased balance and postural control. The therapist selects the appropriate horse and equipment after determining what the goals will be. Examples of goals might include improvements in head control, coordination of breathing with swallowing and vocalization, better upper body control to allow improved use of the hands, improved trunk balance, independent sitting balance on a moving surface, improved walking through better balance and control of the legs.

Riders typically have hippotherapy sessions once a week. Safety and support are provided to each rider by having a horse leader/handler, a therapist side-walker directing the session, and a volunteer side-walker assisting the therapist with the rider.

The rider's activities during the therapy session vary according to age and ability. Often, alternative

positions are used to encourage organization and relaxation of the brain and body. Lying on the back of a horse encourages relaxation of spasticity, but also provides a strong sense of midline or "center", as the horse has a clear midline to his body that the rider can feel underneath him. With the rider lying either lengthwise or across the horse on his stomach in "prone" positions, he is encouraged to lift his head, to visually track people and objects, to relax muscles not needed, to sense his midline, and to begin to push away from the support surface - resisting gravity. Sitting facing backward refines the ability to sit up, maintain balance against gravity; weight-bearing on hands helps strengthen the upper body and promotes the ability to protect the face against falls.

Soon the rider may truly focus on sitting facing forward without always having to hold on for balance! From here, the therapist and rider may work toward more improved balance, body control, and sensory processing through other developmental positions such as kneeling or standing on a walking horse. This is serious strengthening, balance, and postural training for riders, leading them toward much better movement skills off the horse. And it is "off the horse" where each rider's function truly lies - making day-to-day life movement easier and more efficient.

Many riders at Greenlock progress out of hippotherapy and into recreational riding where the focus becomes learning to ride and independently control this big but gentle animal under the direction of a riding instructor. Greenlock is finding that hippotherapy is in great demand these days, but not enough therapists are trained in the techniques. With this in mind, one of Greenlock's goals is to become a training center for therapists so they can acquire the skills to provide this fun and useful therapy to people with disabilities.