

Frequently seen medical conditions

Cerebral Palsy

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Condition: A disorder of movement resulting from a permanent, non-progressive defect or lesion of the immature brain. This can affect not just the motor centre in the brain but also their ability to speak, visual ability and spatial / perceptual awareness. Some have normal intellectual ability but some are affected more globally in their development.

Participants with Cerebral palsy may have: changes in their muscle tone, either causing high tone (spasticity) or low tone (hypotonia) or a mixture of both. If movement is stiff they may have a limited range of movement in some joints. If they have more low tone they will find it difficult to maintain their posture on a horse. Both types are likely to show muscle fatigue quicker than normal. Some people with CP lack postural stability and have too much movement which is difficult for them to control (dyskinesia).

Growth and environmental factors will affect their development and very often as they get older these problems become more difficult to manage.

There are different classifications of cerebral palsy: hypertonic, hypotonic, athetoid, ataxic or dyskinetic. The distribution of abnormal muscle tone is very variable and causes different issues from a riding point of view – ie diplegia, hemiplegia, quadriplegia. Not only does it affect individual movements but also their balance, use of their eyes, breathing, speech and swallow, and facial expression.

Riders with cerebral palsy often need careful assessment of their methods of mounting and dismounting, allowing them time and encouragement to use the abilities they have to actively participate, while keeping them safe.

How riding can help: Riding helps to normalize muscle tone and develop muscle strength, and improve their awareness of movement and balance, and this helps with sensory integration. Riding also gives them a huge sense of achievement and improves their self-confidence.

Multiple Sclerosis

Condition: This is one of the most common progressive neurological conditions and usually starts in early adulthood. The pattern of the disease is generally a series of acute episodes followed by partial remission leading to gradually increasing disability.

Participants with Multiple Sclerosis may have: Excessive muscle tone and loss of coordination of movement will affect function. Speech may be slurred, vision may be impaired and sensation is often affected. Fatigue should be avoided but activity during periods of remission is very important.

How riding can help: Improves balance and coordination and helps to maintain muscle power. Social interaction is very important.

Stroke (cerebral vascular accident)

Condition: A stroke is a serious life threatening medical condition that occurs when the blood supply to part of the brain is cut off. The sooner a person receives treatment for a stroke, the less damage is likely to happen.

Participants with a Stroke may have: Increased muscle tone, usually in one arm and leg on the same side of the body. The leg may be stiffly extended and the arm flexed into the body. Asymmetrical posture and loss of normal movement will produce problems with balance and functional activities.

Where paralysis is on the right side in a person with normal dominance there will probably be problems with speech and language. They may also have problems with scanning the visual field to one side and seeing objects approaching from that side.

How riding can help: The aim is to regain symmetry by centring the rider and encouraging bilateral activity. The movement of the equine will help to normalise the muscle tone in the affected side.

Deafness

Condition: Deafness is a major but unseen handicap. Most riders with a hearing impairment wear hearing aids and may also lip read and use sign language. Some riders with a profound hearing loss have a cochlear implant and this may affect hat fitting.

Deaf blindness is a combination of sight and hearing loss that affects a person's ability to communicate, access information and get around. It can also be known as a dual sensory loss or multi-sensory impairment.

How riding can help: Deafness can be associated with many different medical conditions which can be helped by riding as a way to improve balance and control and interaction with others.

Visual Impairment

Condition: Defined as a limitation of one or more functions of the eye or visual system.

A participant with a visual impairment may have: The sharpness, colour or clarity of vision and the normal range, of what can be seen, may be affected.

How riding can help: Touch and hearing are of vital importance in communication. Describe the surroundings and allow rider and drivers to explore for themselves. Keep communicating with them when you are moving about so they know where you are.

Learning disabilities:

Autism

Condition: A condition characterised by learning difficulty, introverted behaviour, language problems, repetitive movements and intolerance of change of routine.

Participants with autism may have: decreased contact with other people, limited eye contact, unusual repetitive behaviour and poor or non-verbal communication.

How riding can help: The rhythmic movement of the equine may be reassuring. Stimulation can be increased to gain a response. Physical contact with the equine may help to develop other relationships.

ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder)

Condition: Is a neurodevelopmental disability affecting the brain and its way to process information and control behaviours, attention, impulse control and hyperactivity. ADHD can also appear with other developmental or psychiatric conditions.

ADD (Attention Deficit Disorder) is the same neurodevelopmental disability as ADHD apart from the hyperactivity.

How riding can help: Riding can help by giving structure, routine and realistic expectations with clear goal setting.

Down syndrome:

Condition: The single most common chromosomal cause of learning difficulty. People with Down syndrome vary considerably in intelligence.

Participants with Down syndrome may have: characteristic physical features, low muscle tone, shorter stature and may have an associated heart defect and there is a high incidence of deafness.

How riding can help: Riding can help by encouraging postural control and improved sitting ability. Core strength may increase with independent use of arms and legs for rein control and leg aids.

Mental Health

Anxiety

Condition: A feeling of unease, such as worry or fear that can be mild, moderate to severe. However, some people find it hard to control their worries. Their feelings of anxiety are more constant and can often affect their daily lives.

How riding can help: Riding can provide a safe, secure environment with regular routine and familiar faces. Unmounted activities may be helpful. Small well planned goals can help.

Depression

Condition: Is a common and serious medical illness that negatively affects how someone feels the way they think and how they act. Depression may cause sadness and loss of interest in activities once enjoyed. It can lead to a variety of emotional and physical problems and can decrease a person's ability to function at work or at home. There may be an identifiable trigger such as a bereavement or no clear reason.

Participants with depression may: symptoms may vary from mild to severe and can include: feeling sad, or having a depressed mood, loss of interest or pleasure in activities once enjoyed, changes in appetite – weight loss or gain, trouble sleeping or sleeping too much, loss of energy or increased fatigue, feeling worthless or guilty, difficulty thinking, concentrating or making decisions and thoughts of death or suicide.

How riding can help: Riding can provide a safe, secure environment with regular routine and familiar faces. Unmounted activities may be helpful.