

RISING TO THE CHALLENGE

CERTIFICATION FOR THERAPY PROFESSIONALS INCORPORATING HIPPO THERAPY IN TREATMENT



BY CAROL HUEGEL, PT, HPCS AND
MEGAN SELLENRAAD-HAMELIN, OTR, HPCS



In the spirit of this issue of *Equilibrium* dedicated to assessment, therapists are called to continuously evaluate their own knowledge, technique, and clinical reasoning skills. This article focuses on methodology for therapists incorporating hippotherapy to both validate existing knowledge through certification exams as well as continue learning by utilizing a variety of resources available.

WHAT IS THE AHCB?

The American Hippotherapy Certification Board (AHCB) is the certifying body of the AHA, Inc. The Board was originally founded in 1998 and became an official subsidiary of AHA, Inc. in 2020. The AHCB was formed for the purpose of developing and maintaining the Examination for the Clinical Specialty of Hippotherapy and the AHCB Certification Examination. It is purposely separate from the AHA, Inc., whose mission is education—much like a university therapy program does not oversee the national certification or licensure exams for a therapist.



WHAT IS THE IMPORTANCE OF THE AHCB TO A THERAPIST UTILIZING EQUINE MOVEMENT AS PART OF TREATMENT?

The AHA, Inc. Best Practice Guidelines state that education through Hippotherapy Treatment Principles Parts I and II and AHCB credentialing is considered best practice when incorporating equine movement into an occupational therapy, physical therapy, or speech-language pathology treatment plan. The AHCB Hippotherapy Certification Exam confirms and validates the knowledge gained through the coursework and experiential learning. AHCB certification promotes delivery of safe and effective treatment incorporating hippotherapy, ultimately contributing to positive client outcomes and further driving research and reimbursement. Increasingly, third-party payors are also requiring certification to reimburse for therapy when equine movement is used as a treatment tool. Certification may also help to decrease the cost of equine liability insurance as it indicates a higher degree of professionalism and safety awareness.

In summary, benefits of certification include:

- Formal recognition of knowledge
- Validation
- Improved reputation
- Enhanced credibility of therapist, program, and treatment methodology
- Encouragement and assurance of continued professional development
- Increased respect from referring physicians, potential employers, clients and their families, and colleagues
- Increased potential for promoting hippotherapy, both within the general community as well as a precursor for involvement within the AHA Inc., AHCB, or supporting committees
- Improved third party payment and insurance reimbursement

I'M INTERESTED IN CERTIFICATION, WHAT NOW?

Detailed information on the application process and requirements, along with candidate handbooks and recommended reading, can be found online at www.hippotherapycertification.org.

There are 2 tests available to practitioners:

➔ AHCB CERTIFICATION EXAM

The AHCB Certification Exam, which was first offered in 2012, is meant to recognize basic clinical competency in the standards of utilizing equine movement and safety while working with an equine. Test items focus on knowledge of utilizing hippotherapy, comprehension, and application of that knowledge for treatment. Content covers program administration, basic horsemanship, posture and movement principles, and hippotherapy applications. It is currently offered to occupational therapists, physical therapists, and speech-language pathologists, as well as assistants in all 3 disciplines. Speech-language pathology assistants must ensure their state's practice act allows them to work within the type of environment that would incorporate hippotherapy. Therapists who pass the exam with the required 120/150 items correct are considered AHCB Hippotherapy certified individuals, but do not add professional initials.

➔ HIPPO THERAPY CLINICAL SPECIALTY EXAM (HPCS)

The Hippotherapy Clinical Specialty Exam (HPCS) was initiated in 1999 and denotes advanced expertise in utilizing equine movement, clinical reasoning, and equine skills. Test items focus more on application of knowledge, synthesis, and evaluation/clinical reasoning skills while utilizing hippotherapy, requiring a higher level of comprehensive knowledge. More advanced riding skill is also required. This exam is offered to occupational therapists, physical therapists, and speech-language pathologists. Therapists who pass the exam with the required 200/250 items correct are considered Hippotherapy Clinical Specialists may add the professional credentials HPCS.

WHAT ARE THE REQUIREMENTS FOR CERTIFICATION?

Practitioners applying to sit for either exam must be currently licensed or certified in the profession of physical therapy, occupational therapy, or speech-language pathology.

Each test applicant must meet the following criteria in alignment with the purpose of each certification:

Additional criteria for the AHCB exam:

- Complete AHA, Inc. Hippotherapy Treatment Principles Parts I and II (or equivalent)

- Have worked in profession of occupational therapy, physical therapy, or speech-language pathology for at least 1 year full-time or equivalent (2,000 hours)
 - This test is also available to physical therapy assistants, occupational therapy assistants, or speech-language pathology assistants meeting the criteria, provided the speech-language pathology state practice acts allow them to work in the type of environment that would incorporate hippotherapy.
- Have a minimum of 25 hours of direct patient treatment using hippotherapy
- Be comfortable working with horses and be able to groom, tack, mount/dismount and ride with control at the walk and trot. This must be verified by someone with credentials through either United States Pony Club (USPC), United States Dressage Federation (USDF), Professional Association of Therapeutic Horsemanship, International (PATH), Certified Horsemanship Association (CHA), or British Horse Society Assistant Instructor (BHSAI) or equivalent.

Additional criteria for the HPCS exam:

- Have worked in profession for at least three 3 years full-time or equivalent (6,000 hours)
- Have a minimum of 100 direct patient treatment hours using hippotherapy within the last 3 years
- Be experienced and comfortable working with horses, demonstrate the ability to groom, tack, and mount/dismount, and show independent, skilled riding ability at walk, trot, and canter. This must be verified by someone with credentials through either USPC, USDF, PATH International, CHA, or BHSAI or equivalent.

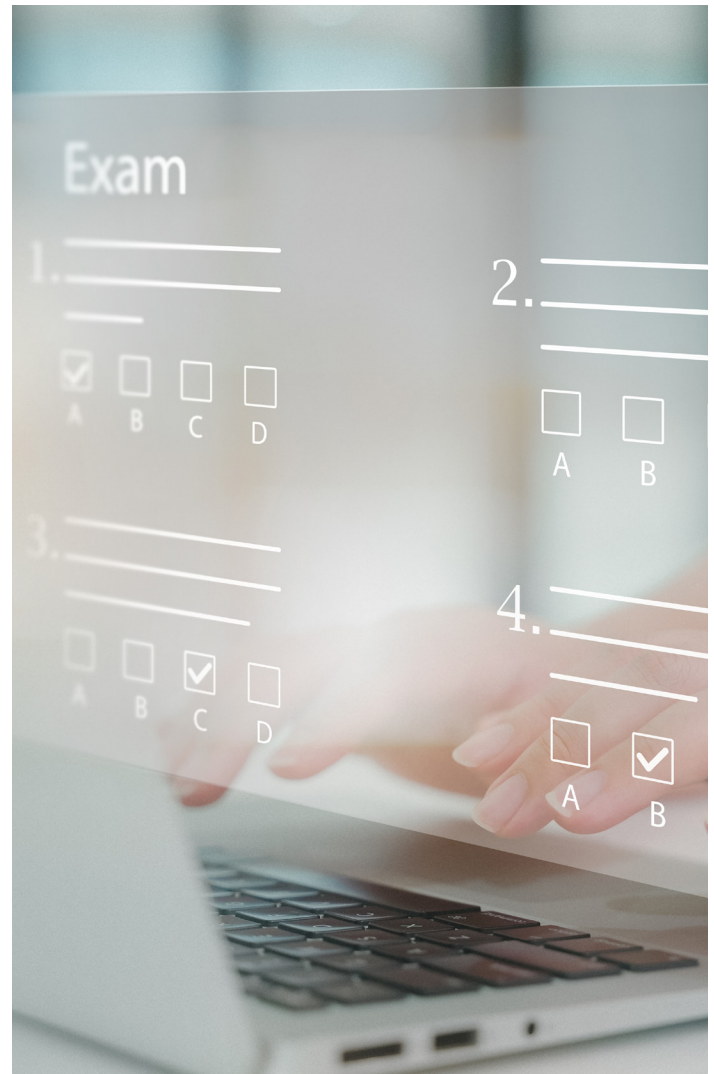
Once the appropriate exam has been identified for level of experience and expertise, an application must be completed to verify the above criteria is met and fee paid. Testing windows and application deadlines may be found online at www.hippotherapycertification.org.

HOW ARE TEST ITEMS DEVELOPED?

The content outline for each exam (found towards the end of each Exam Candidate Handbook) dictates the topics of the items. Candidate Handbooks are available on the AHCB website at www.hippotherapycertification.org; select the link to access the appropriate handbook.

Test items may be developed and submitted for review by any individual currently holding an AHCB credential. AHCB has developed a webinar to teach item development, which was offered this past fall. Plans are in the works to offer the content in person at the March 2024 AHA, Inc. Biennial Conference. Each item must have a reference(s) which can be taken from any sources on the list of references found after the Content outline in each Exam Candidate Handbook. Submitted items are reviewed and revised by the AHCB Board members, then placed in the Item Bank. Each item is again reviewed by the AHCB Board members when placed on an exam. Following administration of the exam, the board reviews the psychometric data to guarantee the exam has testing validity and reliability, ensuring it is fair, accurate, and equitable.

If you are already credentialed by AHCB, consider submitting test items, including references, to the AHCB, and/or attend an AHCB Item Development offering.



TEST YOUR KNOWLEDGE!*

AHCB SAMPLE QUESTIONS:

1. Which equine characteristics would be most important to consider for a client with poor hip mobility and fair postural control?
 - A. Barrel width, height, and gradeability of movement
 - B. Stride length, height, and impulsion
 - C. Barrel width, slope of shoulder, and gradeability of movement
 - D. Pastern angle, length of back, and stride overtrack
2. Which horse breed would most likely provide a narrow base of support for a client?
 - A. American Quarter Horse
 - B. Thoroughbred
 - C. Draft Cross
 - D. Halflinger
3. While all items may be considered best practice, all of the following are PATH, Intl. guidelines for alternate helmet use EXCEPT:
 - A. An experienced horse handler
 - B. An enclosed arena
 - C. Two sidewalkers
 - D. Use of a gait belt
4. Which of the following horse movements are MOST appropriate for use in hippotherapy?
 - A. Pace, jog, leg yield
 - B. Jog, leg yield, forward walk
 - C. Leg yield, canter, forward walk
 - D. Forward walk, jog, amble

HPCS SAMPLE QUESTIONS:

5. Which stirrup is most appropriate to use when promoting lower extremity weight bearing during equine movement for someone with increased tone in their plantar flexors?
 - A. An S-curve English safety stirrup
 - B. A Western quick release stirrup
 - C. A covered Devonshire or endurance stirrup
 - D. A Peacock English safety stirrup

SCENARIO (USED FOR QUESTIONS 6, 7 AND 8)

A client with cerebral palsy presents with increased tone in extremities and 20 degrees of abduction bilaterally. Client has postural control to briefly bench sit for 7 minutes with contact guard, demonstrating posterior pelvic tilt, thoracic rounding, and forward head posture with fair head control. Lack of saliva

control which is observed secondary to open mouth posture and forward head position. Active reach can be performed within base of support with visual cueing, but functional grasp and release are limited, bilaterally. It has been documented that postural control and alignment improve with equine movement.

6. Which position would BEST facilitate increased lumbar curve and thoracic extension, and facilitate lip closure?
 - A. Reverse astride, prone pushing up on elbows
 - B. Forward astride, holding surcingle handles
 - C. Forward astride, using stirrups for weight bearing
 - D. Side sitting, reaching forward for a toy
7. Which equine would be most appropriate?
 - A. A wide barrel to provide increased base of support and stretch hip adductors, large overtrack for predominately lateral movement, moderate impulsion for A/P movement
 - B. A narrow barrel to work on postural control and avoid over stretching hip adductors, steep angles shoulder to provide more vertical displacement, minimal impulsion and A/P movement
 - C. A medium barrel width to provide a base of support without causing internal rotation of the hips, average ability to track up providing moderate rotational movement, moderate impulsion for A/P movement
 - D. A narrow barrel width to work on postural control and avoid over stretching hip adductors, high degree of overtrack for predominantly lateral movement, well sloped shoulders to provide less vertical displacement
8. Which of the following is the most appropriate method for addressing grasp and release skills?
 - A. Weight bearing on upper extremities during portions of equine movement followed by reaching with trunk rotation and dropping a bean bag to a target while moving at a slow walk
 - B. Weight bearing on upper extremities during portions of equine movement followed by reaching for a bean bag at midline and releasing to stationary target at a halt
 - C. Passive range of motion at the halt followed by overhead reach and releasing a bean bag to a target on the ground at a halt
 - D. Passive range of motion at the halt followed by reaching with trunk rotation and throwing a bean bag to a target while moving at a slow walk

*All practice items have references from the Part 1 Hippotherapy Treatment Principles course manual, 6th edition.

DID YOU KNOW?

Your AHCB credential is good for 5 years. One of the benefits of certification is the encouragement of continued professional development. Renewal of AHCB Hippotherapy Certification is as easy as maintaining AHA, Inc. membership for all 5 years, and attending at least one AHA, Inc. Biennial Conference or course. Many AHCB therapists choose to take the HPCS exam around the time of renewal. Renewal requirements are available at <https://hippotherapycertification.org/certification-renewal/>.

AHA, Inc. offers many resources to help therapy professionals enhance their knowledge and clinical reasoning when integrating equine movement. The International Interdisciplinary Case Study Group has monthly Zoom meetings that cover a variety of topics, including description of various diagnoses/health conditions, related terminology, therapy considerations, various evaluative tools, treatment tools and strategies, and considerations for the incorporation of equine movement, often with actual client photos and videos, to promote interactive discussion. Advertisement for upcoming group sessions can be found on AHA, Inc. social media platforms and e-blasts. There is no cost to attend. Many meetings have been recorded and are available to view.

Lunch and Learn sessions are also being offered, providing a 75-minute presentation including Q&A, providing a variety of educational presentations. Topics have included “Let’s Stretch and Learn – Seated Yoga for Dynamic Equine Surface,” “Coding, Billing and Documenting Therapy Services,” “Making the Most of Your AHA, Inc. Membership,” and many more. Look for dates and topics by following the AHA, Inc. on social media and checking the website! Past presentations are available, some at no cost, others for a nominal fee. AHA, Inc. also advertises educational offerings through Horse and Human Research Foundation and HETI – The Federation of Horses in Education and Therapy International.

Don’t forget the AHA, Inc. Biennial Conference. The next one will be March 7-9, 2024 in Jacksonville, FL. The Pre-conference and Keynote presentations are not to be missed!

Any of the above offerings can be used to gather knowledge to prepare to sit for an AHCB Exam, or to attain CEU’s for renewal of your credential. There are also options for one-on-one assistance. AHA, Inc. Faculty members are available for mentoring, and there is also a separate mentorship program available.

INSIDER INFORMATION

There will be changes related to AHCB test delivery beginning in the second half of 2024. These changes will most likely necessitate a cost increase. They will also likely cause a decrease in frequency of the HPCS exam from twice a year to once a year. It is suggested that qualified therapists strongly consider applying for an exam in the first half of 2024 to avoid fee changes or the possibility of a hiatus in the offering of the exams. The currently published testing dates will remain unchanged.

The AHCB has always worked to make testing as affordable as possible and will continue to do so. The AHCB Board members all work on a volunteer basis and do not receive remuneration for their services. All exam cost increases are related to item banking, administration of exams, and psychometric analysis. ◀

ANSWER KEY

- | | | | |
|------|------|------|------|
| 1. A | 2. B | 3. D | 4. B |
| 5. C | 6. A | 7. C | 8. B |

*All practice items have references from the Part 1 Hippotherapy Treatment Principles course manual, 6th edition.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The authors would like to thank Deb Silkwood-Sherer, PT, HPCS for her writing mentorship.

CAROL HUEGEL, PT, HPCS

Carol Huegel, PT, HPCS is the Co-Chair of the American Hippotherapy Certification Board. She is a Coordinating Faculty member for the AHA, Inc. and hosts the monthly AHA, Inc. International Interdisciplinary Case Study Group meetings. Carol has been integrating equine movement in physical therapy treatment

since the 1980s and remains passionate about this extraordinary treatment tool. She continues teaching, mentoring, and assisting in the certification process to help ensure safe and effective treatment by all.



MEGAN SELLENRAAD-HAMELIN, OTR, HPCS

Megan Sellenraad-Hamelin is an occupational therapist, HPCS and PATH CTRI in Traverse City, Michigan. She owns Making Strides LLC (DBA Making Strides Therapeutic Services), and works through Reining Liberty Ranch, a PATH Intl. Member Center.

