

Horses
are Sensational



SHIFTING GEARS

Nature's 4-Speed Machines

As humans, we're bound to bipedal (a fancy word for walking on two legs) movement. That means we generally move with just our two feet, one foot in front of the other. We walk, skip and run on two feet. But with four legs (a.k.a. quadrupedal), horses move in more ways than we do, and much faster than us.

Movement is what horses are all about. Horses move for a variety of reasons... to find food and water, to find a friend, to find that perfect pasture to call home, and to run from predators. The ability to move is essential to their survival!

Depending on how fast they want to go, or are asked to go by their rider, most breeds of horses have four natural gaits. They walk, trot, canter and gallop.



Walk This Way

A four-beat gait, two feet are always in contact with the ground. The gait is from side to side. It goes something like this: 1-2-3-4... left hind leg, left front leg, right hind leg, right front leg. Walking uses the least amount of energy. A horse's average walking speed is four miles per hour (6.4 km/hour).

Trot to the Beat

Horses are built to trot. With two feet on the ground at all times, it's a little bit faster than the walk with an average speed of eight miles per hour (13 km/hour). The trot is a two-beat gait with the opposite hind foot and front foot hitting the ground at the same time. Horses that are in good condition can trot for hours, but for the rider, it's a bumpy ride!

Giddy Up

A little bit faster now. When a horse needs a little more speed, they shift gears, and go into a canter. It has three beats and an average speed of 10-17 miles per hour (16-27 km/hr).

Taking Flight

The gallop is a fully extended four-beat gait and it's fast, averaging 25 to 30 miles per hour (40-48 km/hr). It's the only gait in which the horse is suspended in air when all four hooves are off the ground. In the wild, where speed is important, horses gallop to flee from predators. And of course they gallop to the finish line on racetracks.

Locomotion Trivia

- 1 Galloping is exhausting work! A horse seldom gallops for more than 1 or 2 miles (1.6 or 3.2 km) before they need to rest.
- 2 In harness racing, the trot (called "pace") of a Standardbred is faster than the gallop of the average horse.
- 3 Until the 1870s no one was sure if all the hooves of a trotting horse left the ground at once. British photographer Eadweard Muybridge solved the mystery with a series of photographs that he put all together, creating the first "movie."
- 4 A horse gets its propulsion from its back legs.
- 5 Gaited horse breeds have been bred for a smooth ride and have five gaits.
- 6 Riders learn to rise and fall in the saddle to the beat of the horse's trot.
- 7 Horses can swim and jump!
- 8 Ready, Set, Go! A horse can reach full speed from a standing start to a gallop in less than five seconds.
- 9 In Western riding a slow trot is called a jog.
- 10 Horses' hooves hit the ground heel first, then toe.

