

What is toe walking?

Toe walking is when a child walks on their tiptoes instead of placing their heel down to step forward.

- Children toe walk at times when they first learn to walk. Most children outgrow toe walking by 2 years old.
- Talk with the doctor if your child toe walks after age 2 or begins to toe-walk after walking normally. Your child may need to be checked to find out if there are any problems causing it.

Why does my child toe walk?

Your child may toe walk for an unknown reason. This is called **idiopathic toe walking**. Children with idiopathic toe walking may:

- Be able to walk with heels down when asked but return to toe walking when distracted.
- Have tightness of the lower leg muscles or Achilles tendon.
- Have a family history of toe walking.

Toe walking can also be caused by:

- A neurologic condition, such as cerebral palsy or autism.
- Balance problems or muscle weakness.
- Other problems with the brain, nervous system or muscles, such as muscular dystrophy or spinal cord abnormalities

What are the long-term effects if my child continues to toe walk?

Your child may have 1 or more of these if they do not get treatment:

- Tight muscles and tendons
- Abnormal stress on the knees, hips and lower back. This can cause pain over time.
- An increased risk of falling and injury due to lack of coordination and ankle range of motion
- Problems keeping up with peers in PE classes or sports. This can affect self-esteem.

What doctors could my child see?

Talk with the doctor about your child's needs and if they need any tests. Your child may need to see a specialist, such as:

- An orthopedist – a doctor who cares for people with bone and muscle problems.
- A neurologist – a doctor who cares for people with problems of the brain, spinal cord and nerves.
- A physiatrist – a doctor who cares for people with muscle and physical problems.

What treatments could my child have?

Your child may have 1 or more of these:

- Physical therapy – exercises to stretch and strengthen muscles and to work on walking pattern

In case of an urgent concern or emergency, call 911 or go to the nearest emergency department right away.

Toe walking, continued

- Serial casting – a way to help stretch tight muscles in the calf and tight ankle joints by using a series of casts on the leg
- Leg braces, such as an AFO (ankle-foot orthosis) – a way to help keep heels down when walking
- Night splints – a type of brace that is worn at night to keep muscles lengthened
- Botulinum toxin A injection – a type of shot that is given to relax tight muscles
- Surgery to cut part of the muscle that is too tight if other treatments do not help

Your child may also need exercises to help correct the problem. Your child's doctor and physical therapist will let you know:

- What exercises to do with your child.
- How often to do exercises with your child.

What are some exercises for toe walking?

Strengthening

- Duck walk down the hallway. Lift toes high toward the ceiling while walking on the heels.
- Pull or push a laundry basket filled with toys. Keep heels down.
- Do wall slides.
 - Lean back against a wall with legs out from the wall about 8 inches.
 - Slide the back down the wall until the knees bend at an 80 to 90 degree angle. Stay in this position for 10 to 15 seconds

Balance

- Balance on 1 foot while keeping heels flat.
- Your child could:
 - Try picking up marbles with their toes while standing.
 - Throw or catch a ball while standing with 1 foot up on a step or ball.
- Stand with feet on a line (toes touching opposite heel in front).
- Stand on a pillow or couch cushion while throwing or catching a ball.

Walking

- Walk up hills, or on a treadmill at an incline. Try to keep heels down.
- Walk backwards on flat ground. Focus on keeping heels down.
- Walk along curbs in a safe place like the park. Keep heels down.

Your child's therapist or doctor may also advise shoes that come up around the ankle, such as high tops or boots. These can help to support the ankle and give a little resistance if your child tries to go up on their toes. Sometimes a firm sole can also help to prevent rising up on toes.

This teaching sheet contains general information only. Talk with your child's doctor or a member of your child's healthcare team about specific care of your child.

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