

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 age 2.
- If your child toe walks after age 2, talk with the doctor. 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:

- Often be able to walk with heels down when asked to do so but return to toe walking when distracted.
- Have tightness of the lower leg muscles.
- Have a family history of toe walking.

Toe walking can also be caused by:

- Cerebral palsy
- Autism
- Problems processing information from the senses (eyes, ears, nose, mouth and skin) to the brain. This is called sensory processing disorder.
- Balance problems or muscle weakness
- Other problems with the brain, nervous system or muscles

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

If toe walking is not treated, your child may have one or more of these:

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

What tests could my child have?

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 (doctor who cares for people with bone and muscle problems)
- A neurologist (doctor who cares for people with problems of the brain, spinal cord and nerves)

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

Toe walking, continued

What treatments could my child have?

Your child may have one or more of these:

- Physical therapy – exercises to stretch and strengthen muscles
- Serial casting if muscles in the lower leg (calf) are tight – a way to help stretch muscles and joints by using a series of casts on the leg
- Leg braces, such as an AFO (ankle-foot orthosis) – a type of brace that keeps heels down when walking
- Night splints – a type of brace that is worn at night to keep muscles stretched
- 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 which of the activities listed below to do with your child.
- Teach you how to do them.
- Let you know how often to do them with your child.

Exercises for all children

- Duck walk down hallway. Lift toes high toward the ceiling while walking on the heels.
- Pull or push a laundry basket filled with toys. Keep heels down.
- Balance on one foot while keeping heels flat. Your child could try:
 - Picking up marbles with their toes and placing them into a bucket.
 - Popping bubbles with their toes. Have someone blow bubbles and catch them on the wand. Then, have your child pop the bubble with their toes lifted in air.
- Perform 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.

Walk, jump and hop

- Wear 1 to 2 pound ankle weights when walking and running for 30 minutes at a time.
- Walk up hills or inclines. Try to keep knees straight and heels down.
- Jump up and down on 2 feet for 10 seconds at a time. Keep heels down.
- Hop on 1 foot on the floor or grass.
- Walk along curbs in a safe place like the park. Keep heels down.

Your child’s therapist or doctor may also advise “squeaker shoes”. These shoes squeak when your child walks correctly. Some options may include:

- Wee Squeak

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Toe walking, continued

- Squeakers
- Itzy Bitzy
- Little Blue Lamb

You may also use an option that can be placed around shoes that your child already has. This is called Gait Spot.

Exercises for older children

- Walk on a treadmill with an incline.
- If you have a Nintendo Wii, play balancing games (like Wii Fit yoga pose).
- Roller skate in a safe place. Hold your child's hand if they are younger or unsteady. Have them wear a helmet and other protective gear.

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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