

Toe Walking FAQs

WHAT IS TOE WALKING?

Toe walking is when a child walks on the balls of their feet most of the time. It can be noticeable when they first start standing, or it can develop later. Some infants and toddlers stand or walk on their toes as their leg muscles are stretching out; however, this should only last a short time. They should mostly stand, walk and move on flat feet.



WHAT CAUSES TOE WALKING?

Most of the time, we do not know the reason why children walk on their toes. The medical term for this is “idiopathic toe walking.” The following outlines some reason:

- High sensitivity to touch, specifically on the bottom of their feet
- Preferred feeling of being higher off the ground and putting pressure on the balls of their feet or toes
- High-energy children that always seem to be moving
- Hereditary influences, e.g., other family members that have toe walked
- Large amounts of time in baby walkers, jumpers or exersaucers
- Medical diagnoses: High muscle tone, muscle stiffness caused by an injury to the brain, genetic conditions, tightening/catching of the nerves in the spine, or diagnoses that include sensory processing difficulties such as autism spectrum disorder

There are many reasons that a child may walk on their toes. It is important to make sure there is not a serious medical reason for their toe walking.

WHAT IS THE CONCERN WITH TOE WALKING?

It is important for toe walking to be assessed by medical doctors and therapists to determine if treatment is needed. Sometimes, if untreated, the muscles can become so tight they can limit joint movement, increase risk of falling and decrease safety. Toe walking can also cause other joints or muscles to become tight or weak, making it difficult for the child to walk up or down the stairs or perform other tasks in their everyday life.

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WHAT TREATMENTS ARE AVAILABLE FOR TOE WALKING?

Toe walking can be treated through therapy; ankle bracing; stretching; serial casting, or when feet are casted in position to stretch out tight ankle muscles; nighttime braces; injections to relax the muscle; or, in the case of extremely stiff muscles, a surgery to lengthen them. If the child has been walking on their toes for a long time or has significant muscle tightness, it is likely that they will benefit from the above medical treatment options before physical or occupational therapy can help.

WHAT IS THE ROLE OF THERAPY IN TREATING TOE WALKING?

If your child is referred to therapy, your child's occupational or physical therapist will perform an evaluation to determine if therapy would be helpful. If therapy is recommended, the therapist will teach you and your child the following:

- Exercises to improve motion in joints
- Strengthening exercises for weak muscles
- Stretches for tight muscles
- Strategies to retrain the brain and body to balance, move and walk on flat feet
- A home program to keep joints and muscles flexible and strong to decrease risk of falls or joint pain as your child grows

WHAT ARE THE TYPICAL OUTCOMES OF THERAPY?

It is important to know interventions can help decrease toe walking, but toe walking may not stop completely. The focus will be on gaining functional movements such as the following:

- Navigating the environment with increased control and safety with walking up and down stairs, etc.
- Squatting and bending down while keeping heels on floor
- Standing on one foot briefly to improve balance and decrease falls