

Idiopathic toe walking

What is idiopathic toe walking?

Toe walking is walking without the heel touching down. It is common among young children as they learn to walk. Some children still toe walk after the age of 2 or 3. Toe walking can be caused by:

- a shortened heel cord (Achilles tendon).
- cerebral palsy. This effects muscle tone, posture, and coordination.
- muscular dystrophy. This genetic disease causes muscles to weaken over time.
- autism.
- tethered spinal cord.
- Sometimes there is no medical condition which causes it. It is thought of as a habit. This is called idiopathic toe walking.



What else is common in children who toe-walk?

Children who toe-walk often have:

- a family history of toe walking.
- delayed speech development.
- delayed motor development.

How does this affect my child?

Over time, toe walking can cause problems.

- They may get less range of motion in their ankles. This is because of tightness in the heel cord tendon.
- They may have pain in the feet or legs.
- You may see turning out of the long bone below the knee (tibia). This is called foot pronation.

How is it treated?

Treatment focuses on increasing ankle range of motion, strengthening, and retraining the walking pattern. There are a few ways to do this.

- Physical therapy.
- Serial Casting. These are casts that are put on and then taken off each week. Normally, 4 to 6 casts are needed for this to work best.
- Braces (orthotics) or shoe inserts.
- Night stretching splints to maintain range of motion after stretching or casting.
- Surgery to lengthen the tendon.

How can I help my child at home?

- Help them ride a bike or trike.
- Have them practice walking on heels or walking backwards.
- Do exercises to stretch the heel cord as taught by your physical therapist.

Other teaching sheets that may be helpful

Heel cord stretch 1500

Serial casting of the legs: Home care 1240

Ankle-foot orthosis (AFO) 1987

ALERT: Call your child's doctor, nurse, or clinic if you have any concerns or if your child has special health care needs not covered by this information.

This teaching sheet is meant to help you care for your child. It does not take the place of medical care. Talk with your healthcare provider for diagnosis, treatment, and follow-up.