

# Your child is walking on her toes

Reviewed by the BabyCenter Medical Advisory Board



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## What You May Notice

Most children "toe walk" occasionally when they're cruising (moving around a room by holding on to the furniture), especially if they're on a bare floor. Some kids keep toe walking, off and on, just for fun. Little girls pretending to be the Sugar Plum Fairy are especially likely to keep it up.

Generally, until age 2, toe walking isn't something to be concerned about. And often, children who toe walk after that do so out of habit.

But be sure to talk to your child's doctor if your child:

- Walks on her toes most of the time
- Has stiff muscles
- Is uncoordinated
- Walks awkwardly, stumbles, or has a waddling gait
- Has fine motor skills that don't seem to be developing normally (for example, she can't button her shirt)
- Seems as though she can't bear her weight on a flat foot
- Loses motor skills she already had

## What Causes It

If your child always tiptoes, it's possible that she has a physical problem, such as a short Achilles tendon, that actually prevents her from standing flat-footed and limits her range of motion in the ankle. But consistent toe walking is more likely a sign of a motor disorder – most commonly, a form of cerebral palsy.

There are several types of cerebral palsy, and the most common is "spastic," which means the affected muscles are stiff. Children who are born prematurely have a higher risk of developing cerebral palsy.

Many premature infants experience bleeding in the brain, which damages the parts of the brain that control movement. Sometimes an infection that a mother or a baby has during pregnancy also damages brain tissue and leads to cerebral palsy. And sometimes premature infants develop a condition called periventricular leukomalacia, which damages nerves in the brain that affect movement.

If your child walks on her toes she might have spastic hemiplegia/hemiparesis, a form of cerebral palsy in which her Achilles tendons are so tight that her heel is pulled up and her toes point down. Toe walking is also associated with language delays and autism, so it's important to be sure your child isn't having other problems with communication or socialization skills. You may want to schedule a [development assessment](#) to make sure.

If your child's doctor rules out cerebral palsy, autism, and other problems – if her muscle tone is fine, and she has a good range of motion in the ankle – then she'll likely be diagnosed with what's called idiopathic toe walking. This is a catchall diagnosis that means the cause is unknown, and it's likely your child walks on her toes out of habit.

## What Your Doctor May Recommend

An assessment of your child's brain function and motor development is necessary to help your child's doctor figure out the best course of treatment. Early intervention is critical because physical therapy or surgery can improve motor skills and muscle strength, and prevent damage to the muscles that affect joint movement.

If your child has a physical problem such as a short Achilles tendon, treatment may begin with physical therapy that includes stretching.

Your child may also have to wear an ankle-foot orthosis, which is a lightweight plastic brace that goes up the back of the leg and maintains the foot at a 90-degree angle. Your child wears the brace day and night until the problem goes away. (Of course, you can take it off for baths or to practice strengthening exercises.)

Another process called serial casting is sometimes used. In this procedure, a series of casts stretch and lengthen the tendon and increase the range of ankle movement. But according to physical therapist Gay Girolami, "It's passive, and when you practice activities in an active rather than passive way, you see more progress." Also, casts can't be removed on the fly like the braces mentioned above.

In select cases, surgery may be recommended.

If your child has cerebral palsy or autism, rather than a physical problem, therapy will treat the underlying condition. In that case, a [development assessment](#) is the first step to determine what kind of treatment your child needs.

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