

Many babies are born with normal, healthy feet, and good care during their growing years should keep them that way.



BABY'S FEET

Babies need feet to stand, walk and run – and for many other activities – for years to come. There is a lot you can do to maintain those feet in good condition.

Babies develop muscles by kicking and wriggling, so never discourage this. Feet need to be free and active, not restricted by tight bedding, booties, leggings or any other foot covering. It is normal for a baby's feet (and hands) to be cool, so covering is only needed in very cold weather.

Check sock and bootie fit regularly because babies grow very quickly. Something that fits loosely one week may be too tight the next – particularly if it shrinks in the wash. Be careful of combination stretch suits with covered toes. Even if the rest of the suit fits, the feet might be too tight. If necessary, cut them off the suit and hem the edges.

Ankle ties of booties should be loose enough to allow free circulation.

HYGIENE

- Wash your child's feet every day with soap and water.
- Dry thoroughly, especially between the toes, so the skin there does not get soggy.

CRAWLING

When babies begin to crawl, they should do so barefoot. This will help to develop strong foot and leg muscles. Footwear is not generally required at this stage, except in cold weather or when taking baby outside.

WALKING

Babies walk when they are ready. They shouldn't be rushed.

Most begin between nine and 18 months. Some are physically and emotionally ready for that first step well before others. However, it's a mistake – and can be harmful – to encourage babies to walk before they are ready, just because other babies of the same age have already started to toddle.

DON'T use artificial walking aids. They can be detrimental to a child's physical progress. Legs and feet develop best when babies learn to walk at their own pace.

A beginner walker will have a tendency to 'toe out'. This is normal. However, advice should be sought from your community health nurse if a child who has been walking well begins to limp, waddle or refuses to walk.

SHOES

The main function of shoes is to protect our feet from the types of surfaces that we walk on. Consequently, a prewalker has no need for shoes. Even toddlers don't generally need shoes within the protected environment of the home. Barefoot walking allows the child to experience different sensory stimulations and helps to exercise the small muscles of the feet and toes.



FIRST SHOES

Right from the beginning, it is important that shoes fit properly. Choose them carefully because poor fitting could lead to foot deformities later. Growing feet need room to grow.

Shoes should be soft and pliable and fit securely onto feet. Choose a pair with laces, strap or some other fastening to hold the heel in position.

The inner edge of the shoe should be as straight as possible, and the toe should be both wide and deep enough. There should be no pressure on the little toe, and the heel should fit snugly. Avoid tapered shoes.

Sandals with a secure strap over the instep stop the foot slipping forward and damaging toes. This is where foot trouble can start.

Cotton or woollen socks are best, but whatever you buy, check the fit. Don't forget, tight socks can also affect foot development adversely.

DESIRABLE FEATURES OF GOOD SHOES

- Length, breadth and depth need to be adequate. This is assessed by measuring the child's foot before each shoe purchase.
- A firm heel cup is important in helping the heel to sit squarely in the shoe. A soft heel cup will deform rapidly and the shoe will become a 'sloppy' fit.
- The shoe should have a sole which will provide protection and allow flexibility in the area of the ball of the foot.
- A rounded or square toe-box will allow more room for the toes to move than a pointed toe-box.

CHECKING THE SIZE

Allow a space of one to two centimetres between the longest toe and the end of the shoe.

Check the length by getting your child to stand on a piece of cardboard. Mark with a pencil the back of the heel and tip of the longest toe of each foot. Cut a two-centimetre wide strip of cardboard to the marked length, and insert it into the shoe.

Push towards the toe. If there is one to two centimetres difference between the end of the cardboard and the heel of the shoe, the shoe is long enough. If the cardboard touches the heel or just won't fit into the shoe, the shoes should be discarded.

This method will work only with a rounded toe-box. Remember that it is important to check the width and depth of the toecap as well.

It's important to check shoe size regularly yourself. Children do not always complain when shoes start feeling tight.

Shoes with only moderate wear that have become too small for the first wearer may be passed on to the next child in line.

WALKING AND PLAYING

Most children are naturally active, and keen to participate in family outings. Let them walk at their own pace, and only for distances which they can cover without becoming too tired. When children complain of pains in their legs and feet, it may be that they have done enough for that day. If they complain of pain every time they walk then it is a good idea to have their feet examined.

REMEMBER...

- Children's feet have important tasks to perform for the rest of their lives.
- Don't rush baby into walking.
- Choose shoes carefully.
- Check shoe and sock sizes regularly.
- If you have problems, see:
 - your community health nurse
 - a podiatrist
 - your local doctor.

Ask your GP

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