

The foot: From infancy to adulthood

This leaflet gives general information about how to ensure young feet grow healthily. Please ask us if you have any questions.

- It takes about 18 years for a child's foot to fully develop.
- At birth, the foot contains 22 partly developed bones.
- At 6 months, a baby's foot is mostly cartilage and can be deformed if an all-in-one suit is too tight.
- At 2 years, bone structure is developing but there are still large gaps between the bones.
- By age 3 years, the medial arch (which runs along the inside of the foot from toe to heel) can be seen to be developing and the child's footprint takes on a more adult shape. Weight-bearing through the foot begins to shift a little from the medial side (inside) of the foot. The changes develop slowly and are partly dependent on the age at which your child begins to walk unsupported. The arch should be clearly seen when your child is on tiptoes.
- By age 4 years, the arch should be apparent in standing and walking. The foot should look more adult-shaped. Care is needed not to over-support the arch as its structure should be supported by normal muscle and ligament strength. Over-supporting the arch at this stage could lead to overstretched ligaments and could weaken the foot. Holding the heel firmly in the back of the shoe is most important at this stage.
- By age 8 years bones are still fusing together so badly fitting shoes can easily affect the process. The foot now has 26 bones.

Growth plates exist within the bones to allow the foot to grow and develop.

- At 18 years, the foot bones are fully formed.
- While most parents recognise the need for correctly fitting shoes during a child's early years of walking life, few realise that children's feet remain vulnerable to ill-fitting shoes right through their school days, up to the age of 18 years and beyond.

Time for first shoes

Most children learn to walk aged between 9 and 18 months, depending on the development of the required muscular strength. But don't hurry them and try not to be too anxious – your child is an individual and will walk when ready. After all, these are just the first steps on a very long road.

First shoes

Once your child can take a few steps unaided then he or she is ready for that first pair of real shoes. When choosing your child's first shoes the first thing to look for is a shoe shop with a trained fitter. Then make sure the shoes have these features:

- Close-cropped soles to prevent tripping
- Room for movement and growth built in
- Soft leather uppers for cool comfortable feet
- Lightweight, flexible sole to aid walking development
- Whole and half sizes and a choice of widths to find the right fit

- Fully adjustable fastenings
- Padded ankle for protection and support

Main features of a good shoe as your child gets older

Footwear that is too large, too small, or does not fit properly, can cause lifelong foot problems. These problems can easily be avoided by taking care with the type of shoe purchased and considering a few main points.

Designed to fit and support the growing foot

(1) Heel stiffener

This should be around the back and sides of the heel. It helps hold the heel in place within the base of the shoe. Along with a broad base for the heel this will give your child STABILITY.

(2) Small mouth

The mouth of the shoe is the part between the heel and front fastening. A child's shoe should have a small mouth so that when fastened the heel can be secured into the back of the shoe and not slip. If the shoe is too long, the mouth too big or the fastening inadequate the shoe will slip and the child may claw their toes to hold the shoe in place. Slippage can also cause blisters and instability. The fastening should be easy to tighten and once fastened the shoe should not be removable unless the fastening is released.

(3) Toe area shape

Should be round not pointed – pointed toes encourage the formation of bunions later. The toe area should have enough depth so that toes are not rubbing on the top of the shoe.

(4) Sole of shoe

The sole should be a flexible, shock-absorbent material, and preferably non-slip.

Ongoing care

Your child's foot will change in shape as growth continues so always have the width and length measured regularly. This need does not change once your child starts school as the foot bones are still developing and the proper "fit" continues to be a very important.

The ideal shoe becomes more difficult to find as your child gets older and is often a matter of compromise; particularly with older children who are under the influence of fashion and peer group pressure. If the wear pattern in your child's school shoe looks uneven (e.g. the heel wears down on one side only, or the shoe shape looks distorted) check with your doctor to see if the foot and walking pattern are okay. Don't let your child wear old, misshapen shoes; and keep a regular eye on sizing throughout their school days.

Be careful when choosing trainers as your child is running and jumping a lot and the foot is at risk of pressure/overuse and distortion. A child's foot is not yet a small version of the adult end product so be sure trainers are flexible, well fitting, light and supportive.

If you would like a large print or audio version of this information, please ask a member of staff.