

Walk on, baby, walk on!

Your baby's feet have got to carry him through a lifetime of walking and running. Alex Gazzola explains all you need to know about how to look after these often ignored and most delicate of body parts.

You may look upon your baby's feet as nothing more than a couple of cute 'tootsies' that will help him get into mischief about the house, but did you know that those feet are going to end up walking 75,000 miles in his lifetime? With all that distance ahead of him, it's essential you take good care of those miraculous 'feet' of engineering at the end of his legs.

It's important to remember that a baby's foot is a complex part of his body, and not simply a smaller version of an adult's foot. A baby foot is well padded with fat (including a big deposit in the arch, which will disappear in several years) and is largely composed of cartilage which ossifies into bone as he grows. The fore part of the foot is more fully developed than the hind part, and the foot's growth and development – which is highly irregular – will continue until early adulthood.

"Parents must be aware that a baby's foot is very, very malleable," says chiropodist Fred Beaumont. "If you put tight socks on a baby you'll be pushing his foot out of shape, so keep a baby or toddler's feet as free as possible. If your house is warm, safe and comfortable, he won't need socks anyway."

Cover your baby's feet loosely at night as tight covers restrict his movement, and tickle his feet from time to time to encourage kicking to exercise his muscles in preparation for weight bearing when he walks.

Barefoot babes

Shoes in the first year are rarely necessary, but some shoe manufacturers now offer ranges for babies of around six months and over. "Ten years ago we would have recommended parents wait until their children were walking independently before buying shoes," says children's shoe expert Bob Hardy. "But mums now tend to want something to encourage their babies' crawling, and with the fashion for wooden floors which can be slippery, these can help."

Barefoot walking, though, allows the foot to grow as it should and strengthens the muscles and the toes. "You don't need supportive shoes for young babies," stresses Fred Beaumont.

"Just let them crawl or toddle naturally. There's nothing worse than little babies in shoes which are restricting their feet."

Independent walking

But what about when he does start to walk? At eight or nine months, he may be managing a few tentative steps while holding on to you for support. Shoes for this stage are increasingly available, but again most podiatrists will acknowledge that shoes are still unnecessary.

Independent walking can come about anywhere between ten and 18 months, but never push your baby to start walking if he is a later developer than his peers as his feet may not be ready to bear his weight. 'Don't use babywalkers to try and persuade him to walk,' says Fred Beaumont. 'He'll probably try to please you both, but you shouldn't rush him or push him. He will walk when he wants to, when he's ready.'

Tight fit?

Allow him to walk barefoot indoors if it's safe, but when he wants to walk outside, then it's shoe time, as he needs protecting against the elements and outdoor surfaces. It is vital you take him for a professional consultation with a trained shoe fitter. All good shoe shops will carefully measure the child's foot and check its length, width and depth, as well as the arch, the fastening of the shoe you want to buy for him, the back of the shoe, the grip and the way the child walks in his shoes.

It can seem laborious to get the perfect shoes for him, but it is essential. "It's important to get the fitting right as toddlers can't explain the discomfort they may be feeling, because they simply don't have the vocabulary to do it," says Bob Hardy. "Further, they feel very little pain in their feet anyway, because they're so soft and compressible. A skilled shoe-fitter will be able to make a judgement if, for instance, a toddler's toes are being squeezed together."

Once you've bought him shoes, it's important you revisit the shoe store to check his fitting on a regular basis, usually within six weeks to three months, depending on his age. This is a service shoe firms should offer for free to prevent any problems. "One sign parents should look out for when they take their toddler's shoes and socks off is red marks on the feet where the flesh is being compressed," points out Bob Hardy. "This can indicate he's outgrowing his shoes."

Once he's happily walking around in his shoes, do bear in mind this is all still pretty new to him, and that you shouldn't

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overwork or push him. "You must let his feet develop naturally," says Fred Beaumont. "Your toddler is not nearly as strong as you are. If he says to you, 'Mummy, will you carry me?' – he's probably not being lazy, spoiled or difficult, rather it's likely that his feet are just tired."

Fred adds: "Also, make sure you walk at his pace and don't drag him along when out walking, which is awful – and try alternating holding his right and his left hand so he doesn't develop a lop-sided walk."

Do's and Don'ts of Foot Care

Do...

- dress him only in socks which are loose-fitting and made of cotton or wool.
- keep bedclothes and bedding loose and light around the feet when he's in his cot.
- keep him barefoot whenever you can.
- dry his feet carefully between the toes after a bath.
- keep an eye on his feet for any irregularities, such as bruising, blemishes or signs of infection.
- wait until he's toddling before considering buying his first shoes, and by all means wait until he wants to walk outside.
- buy shoes which give stability and protection to his feet, which are soft, flexible and have breathing leather uppers and an adjustable fastening for a snug fit.
- take your child back to the shop for a fitting check after about six to eight weeks.

Don't...

- let his nails grow too long – clip them straight across.
- put young children in socks or babygros that are too small or tight for their feet. This could cause their toes to curl, which can result in permanent damage to growing bones.
- buy synthetic socks or shoes as they won't allow your child's feet to breathe properly, and this could lead to conditions such as athlete's foot. Worse, synthetic materials will only stretch so far, and the resulting pressure could damage a child's growing foot.
- force a child into walking. He will start when he's ready, which can be anytime between 10 and 18 months (firstborns tend to be later starters than subsequent siblings).
- give a child hand-me-down or second-hand shoes for everyday wear under any circumstances, because shoes mould around the foot and adopt a unique 'wear-pattern' of the original owner, which is likely to be unsuitable to your child (occasional-wear shoes such as Wellington boots are okay to pass down).
- save shoes 'for best' or special occasions – he'll grow out of them and you won't get the wear from them. ■

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RESEARCH PROJECT

"Kids: healthy feet – healthy life"

commissioned by the Austrian Federal Ministry of Health and the *Fonds Gesundes Österreich* (Fund for a Healthy Austria)

496 children (between the ages of 6-10) and about 1000 pairs of shoes, slippers and house shoes were tested by our Austrian research team over the last 15 years. The results of our analyses are now available. Our results are based on data collected during Measuring Days for Kids' Feet in Germany, Switzerland and Lichtenstein and can therefore be assumed to apply in these countries. Here are the highlights of our study.

Scientifically proven for the first time worldwide:

- The majority of children can't tell if their shoes fit properly or are too short
- Over 75% of children regularly wear shoes, slippers or house shoes that are too short
- Over 90% of children's shoes, slippers and house shoes are shorter than they should be according to the manufacturer's labelled size
- The majority of parents underestimate the amount of space necessary for a correct fit

Research team: Univ. Prof. Dr. Elisabeth Groll-Knapp, Dr. Wieland Kinz, Dr. Christian Klein www.kinderfuesse.com