

# Flat feet

## Flat feet in children

*Flat feet* due to low arches are common and usually quite normal in children. In fact, all newborn children have flat feet. They are also common in preschool children and present in about 10% of teenagers. It is normal for parents to be very concerned but there is usually nothing to worry about. Children have low arches because they are loose-jointed and flexible so that the arch moulds to a flattened position when standing.

## What usually happens with time?

When the child starts walking, he or she develops a wide stance for balance and the feet roll at the ankles. This is normal. With growth, the muscles of the ankle develop and become strong so that the foot gradually takes shape and about 80% of children will develop a medial arch by their sixth birthday.

## What are the symptoms?

The typical flat foot that is flexible causes no symptoms, even in adult life. Very rarely, it may be stiff and uncomfortable and require treatment. Persistent pain and stiffness is an indication for referral to a specialist.

## What is the tiptoe test?

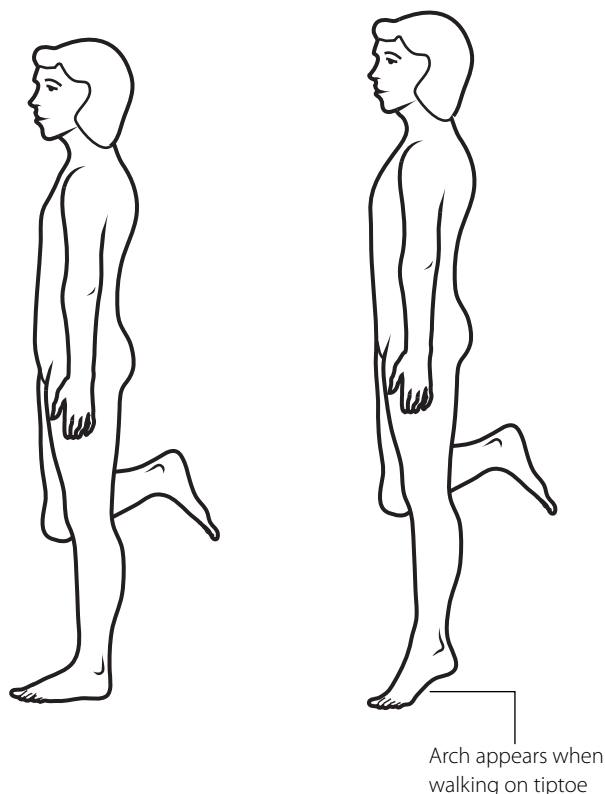
This is a simple test for the presence of an arch. The arch can be seen better when the feet are hanging in the air and even better still when the child stands on tiptoes.

## Are flat feet hereditary?

Yes: there is a tendency for foot shape to be genetically determined. If one or both parents have low arches, their children tend to have low arches.

## Do special shoe inserts help?

Studies in California have shown no benefit for flat feet from wearing orthoses or other forms of arch supports. Arches develop naturally and these inserts do not help them at all. Special modified shoes, splints, massage and other treatments have not been proved to help the feet develop any better.



The tiptoe test

## What about shoes?

Special shoes are not needed. Avoid tight shoes but get shoes that are good quality and that are comfortable, flexible and protective. They should allow freedom of movement and space to grow. Boots have no advantage over shoes. If a child develops excessive wearing of the inner side of the shoes, obtain shoes that have a stiffer heel and some in-built arch support. An experienced shoe retailer can give good advice about this but remember that special orthotic inserts and treatments are rarely needed.