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# ***Low muscle tone***

***Information for  
parents and carers***



**Paediatric Physiotherapy**



## ***What is low muscle tone?***

We've written this leaflet to explain what is meant by "low muscle tone" and to answer some of the questions you may have.

Tone is the resting state of our muscles, and typical muscle tone covers a wide range.

Think about watching a group of children of the same age playing – some of them seem to fall over their own feet all the time, some of them don't have much spring in their legs when they jump, but they are all developing normally and at their own pace.

Low muscle tone is when children's limbs feel a little squidgy or floppy, and very easy to move.

You might have noticed when dressing your child that it's really easy for them to bend their arms and legs more than you would expect. Sometimes they can get into the splits position, or touch their forearm with their thumb. This is because low muscle tone lets the joints move further.

Having low muscle tone can be associated with other conditions, but more often is just part of the child's genetic make-up, and often runs in families.

## ***What does this mean for my child?***

Low muscle tone means that the joints can move a bit more – and if your child wants to be a dancer or a gymnast then that can be a bonus!

However because the joints can move a bit more, then there is usually some instability at the joints too. This is why children with low muscle tone often take longer to reach the motor milestones of crawling, standing and walking.

Imagine your legs are made of spaghetti – now imagine that the spaghetti is slightly cooked; it's much harder to control your legs when they're floppy, so your child has to build up strength in their muscles to help support their joints. So it's not surprising that your child is taking longer to learn to stand, walk or run.

Children with low muscle tone will always seek the stability they need. This explains why they will often w-sit (with their legs in a “w” shape).

W-sitting gives much greater stability when sitting, so they can concentrate on playing. But we discourage it because it stops them moving their upper body (trunk) and can delay motor development. It also encourages intoeing which is very difficult to correct (intoeing is when their feet point inwards when walking – sometimes called pigeon-toed).

**Please discourage your child if they're a w-sitter.** The pictures on the next page show w-sitting, and also three better ways for your child to sit (ring, long and cross-legged sitting).



**W-sit**



**Ring sit**



**Long sit**



**Cross-leg sit**

Low muscle tone doesn't mean that your child is weak. Just try fastening them into their car seat or buggy, or putting on their clothes when they don't want you to!

### ***What can I do to help?***

Play is the best approach for children with low muscle tone. Give them opportunities to be active – on the floor, in the garden, in parks, on the beach, in soft play, swimming, using a bike or trike.

All of this activity will help strengthen their muscles and provide more support to the joints. Remember though, that children with low muscle tone have to work a little harder, as they're working to stabilise themselves as well as to move, so you might also notice that they tire sooner than you might expect.

### ***Does my child need physiotherapy?***

Most children with low tone might take a little longer to reach the 'big' motor milestones, like walking, running and jumping, but they generally catch up without any specialist input.

Sometimes the most sophisticated skills, like hopping on one leg, can be more delayed, but this is not a functional skill – your child can move around, go to nursery or school and play with their friends without needing to hop, so don't worry.

### ***Contact details***

If you do have any concerns, your GP, Health Visitor, or local Child Development Team Physiotherapist will be able to advise you. Telephone numbers are available on the NHS Grampian website, or contact:

**Physiotherapy Department**

**Royal Aberdeen Children's Hospital**

** 01224 552669**

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Feedback from the public helped us to develop this leaflet.  
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