

# Paediatric Flexible Flatfoot

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*Information for parents and  
young people*

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### **What are flexible flat feet?**

When a child has flexible flat feet, it means that all parts of the bottom of the bare foot touch the floor when your child is standing. An arch may appear when sitting, raising their big toe up, or when tiptoeing.

It is typically a variant of normal. Babies and toddlers under 3 have flat feet as the arch of the foot does not start to develop until after this age. The arch usually improves within the child's first 10 years, however, some children will continue to have flexible flat feet into adulthood with no problems.

### **What is the cause?**

Children may have flat feet for a number of reasons, and it often runs in families.

Children with more stretchy joints are more likely to have flexible flat feet.

Tight muscles, particularly during growth spurts can affect the shape of the foot and may cause discomfort for a period.

All your bodyweight is supported by your feet. If you are overweight, flattening and discomfort is more likely.

Rarely, flat feet may be associated with other problems that start in childhood. Flat foot alone is not a cause for worry.

## Is it flexible or rigid?



It is important to establish whether flat feet are flexible and symmetrical (the same on both sides) in appearance.

In a **flexible flat foot** the arch flattens and the heels point outward when standing (see the image on the left). On tip toe the arch appears and the heels turn in (see the image on the right).

Although the appearance of the child's feet often causes concern for parents, flexible flat feet are a normal variant, typically improving with age, and for most children present no problems. Flexible flat feet **DO NOT** require treatment unless they are symptomatic.

In a **rigid flat foot** the arch does not appear on tip toeing, and it might even be a struggle to stand on tip toe at all.

Rigid flat foot is rare. If you are concerned that one or both feet are rigid, you should see your GP for advice.

## **SYMPTOMATIC FLEXIBLE FLAT FEET**

Occasionally, children with flexible flat feet may complain of symptoms which might include:

- Pain in the feet, ankles and legs associated with increased activity levels or standing for long periods.
- Reduced stamina and endurance.
- Callosity development, or blistering when wearing shoes, or difficulty finding shoes to fit that are comfortable.

These symptoms are only of concern if they persist (they don't get better between episodes) and/or result in withdrawing from activities, hobbies, and sports that were previously enjoyed.

Treatment for flexible flat feet is rarely required and only if your child is experiencing significant and persistent symptoms of discomfort. It may take the form of stretching and strengthening exercises, footwear advice, weight loss and activity modification, and/or the fitting of insoles.

Treatment is aimed at reducing symptoms of pain and fatigue, stamina and endurance, stability and foot function, and return to participation in sports and exercise previously enjoyed.

## What can I do to help?

- Aim to modify activities rather than decrease them. For example, if walking significant distances provokes pain, try cycling or swimming instead.
- Maintaining a healthy level of exercise with a balanced diet is advisable, particularly if you are overweight.
- If standing for long periods causes foot pain, ensure your footwear is adequately cushioned and supportive in nature. Changing your footwear is often enough to improve your symptoms.

Here are some examples of good footwear



If your symptoms do not settle with these simple measures, you may be referred to a specialist for further care. It is essential you wear your usual shoes to your appointment so they can be checked as well as your feet.

Stretching your calf muscles can also improve symptoms of foot pain and arch appearance if they are tight. The exercises below show easy to follow stretches for you to try:



### **Calf stretch 1:**

Place one foot forwards, one foot back in “step standing”.

Allow your forward knee to bend and lean forward while keeping your back foot flat on the floor.

Hold your position for 20 seconds to allow the stretch to be effective.

Swap legs and repeat the stretch 3 times for each leg.

### **Calf stretch 2**

Place one foot in front and one foot back, this time a little closer.

Crouch down so both knees bend while keeping your feet flat on the floor.

Lean your weight onto your back leg and again hold this position for 20 seconds.

Swap legs and repeat the stretch 3 times for each leg.

### **Foot strengthening exercises**

Exercises to improve the strength of intrinsic foot muscles have been shown to ease some discomfort associated with symptomatic flat feet.



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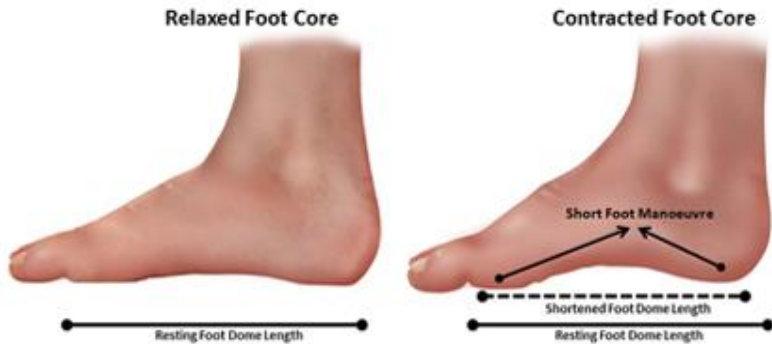


### **Therapy ball exercises**

Perform the exercises 10-15 times and repeat 2-3 times daily. Place a small object such as a ball on the floor and practice picking it up and holding it in your toes.

### **Doming exercises**

Place your foot flat on the ground and gently press your big toe into the ground. Keeping your heel in place, raise your arch upwards and hold for 2 seconds. Repeat 15 times.



### **Try not to worry!**

Having sore feet from time to time is normal. It is very rare that this represents a significant problem.

Try the steps outlined in this advice leaflet first.

If your feet are becoming more and more sore, or you cannot do day to day activities because of the pain, you should seek advice.