

Information for Parents and Carers about Lesser Toe Problems in Children

It is very common for children's toes to overlap each other and appear to be curled up. This is because children's toes are small and very flexible. Although the toes can look a bit funny it is very rare for this to cause any problems. We know that a slightly different shaped or positioned toe in a small child does not affect a child's ability to walk or cause them to trip up.

Most curling, overlapping or under-riding of children's toes improves slowly as their feet grow. A baby's foot is often quite chubby but as they grow the foot thins out. As an infant starts to walk and take their body weight through their feet they also widen. Their toes also become less flexible and lie straighter. This happens naturally during growth and is not affected by strapping or toe splints or special shoes.

Some of the more common variations in toes include:

Over-riding second toe

An over-riding second toe is where the second toe lies cocked up above the first and third toes. This is usually found in the smaller, slightly fatter foot of a baby or an infant. The foot as it grows will become thinner, and as it begins to take the weight of the body it spreads wider. The toe usually then comes to lie in line with the others. Treatment with strapping has no benefit and is not needed for something that will get better with growth.

Webbed toes

Webbing between the second and third toes is common. It never causes symptoms even if complete and attempts to separate the toes with surgery can cause major problems with skin healing and infections. The fear that the child will be teased rarely occurs because children seldom go far with bare feet. The webbing is not easy to see in an active child.

Curly third and fourth toes

This is very common. It is due to a minor imbalance of the small muscles in the foot. These toes rarely cause problems even though they tend to sit under the next toe. Curly toes are never the reason for late walking in a child.

If the toe causes no pain there is no need for treatment. Strapping the toe or toe spacers do not correct the toe shape. If the toe causes pain it will show as redness of the tip or damage to the nail. A simple surgery to cut the tendons to the toe will usually sort the problem though it may take some weeks. If toe shape is the only problem the risks of surgery are too high.



Over-riding fifth toes

In this condition the fifth toe lies on top of the fourth toe. Sometimes it looks quite striking but often is not troubling. If there is pain, or you are unable to find footwear for your child that does not rub then, they may need treatment. Strapping or splints do not seem to help so we may consider surgery. However there can be complications with surgery and therefore is only an option when the toes are causing significant problems.

In Summary

Different shapes and positions are not uncommon in small children. They usually cause no problems for the child, and are never the reason that a child doesn't walk. For the majority of children the appearances will change as they grow and require nothing other than normal footwear. If your child were to develop pain, nail irritation or skin blistering then we may recommend treatment.