

# footprints

An informational newsletter for patients of APMA member podiatrists

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Fall Sports:  
Happy Feet  
Can Help

Back to school each fall means back to the books, but it also means getting back into fall sports. Since many kids spend the summer relaxing and enjoying their time off, participating in football, cross-country, soccer, cheerleading and other strenuous sports can also put a strain on out-of-shape muscles, tendons, and bones. Since most schools now require that kids participate on some level in sports, it's important to keep in mind some basic rules of thumb.

Each child physically matures at his or her own rate, and has a different degree of athletic ability. No amount of training can improve a child's natural athletic ability, but training helps improve coordination and therefore performance. Parents should encourage their children to participate in sports, but never forget that competition should be fun.

Children active in sports programs will improve their cardiovascular and musculoskeletal systems, coordination, and state of mind. In addition, participation in sports develops a sense of self, discipline, teamwork, and the recognition of the importance of a healthy body.

Probably the single most important way to avoid injuries in all sports is to warm up before participating. Warming up helps to loosen muscles and prevent injuries in athletes of all ages. Learning to stretch at an early age will set a good pattern for sports activities as the body develops. In addition, it's extremely important to wear the correct shoes for the sport. Your podiatrist can help you choose the right shoes for your children; the shoes should fit the sport.

According to podiatrists, repetitive overuse or improper training can lead to problems with ligaments, tendons, bones and joints in the feet. As children's feet are still growing, serious injuries can cause long-term problems. Some common injuries are listed here:

Ankle sprains, which can be stretched or torn ligaments, are more common than fractures. Watch for extensive swelling around the ankle. Immediate treatment by the podiatrist is crucial as he/she can provide treatment as well as recommended balancing and strengthening exercises to restore coordination quickly.

Shin splints are tiny tears or inflammation of the muscles on the front of the leg. Rest is the best way to heal these injuries, but if pain persists a podiatrist can recommend strengthening, specific shoes, or orthotics (insoles).

Sever's disease (aka Calcaneal Apophysitis) is an inflammation of a growth plate where the Achilles tendon is attached to the heel bone and is often felt as pain on the bottom of or around the heel. Rest, ice, and heel lifts, and sometimes orthoses are often prescribed by the podiatrist in these cases.

Fractures/stress fractures from overuse in child athletes are commonly seen in podiatric medical offices. Growth plates are particularly susceptible to injuries, but mid-shaft fractures of the bone also occur. If a fracture is not severe, rest and immobilization may be the best treatment. More complicated injuries may require casting or surgical correction. If swelling and pain persist, see a podiatrist immediately. \*



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## Shoes and Your Kids: Small Steps for the Right Fit



Children's feet may be small but unless adults consider the specific needs of young walkers, problems for those children may loom large. Shoes will protect children's feet, but if fit incorrectly, they can do more harm than good. A few simple guidelines for determining proper size, type of shoe and professional care can help you get the right fit for your growing children.

When a child first begins to walk, shoes are not necessary indoors. Shoes may even impede a child's development and progress.

Allowing toddlers to go barefoot or to wear just socks helps the foot to grow normally and to develop its musculature and strength, as well as the grasping action of toes. When walking outside however, babies' feet should be protected in lightweight, flexible footwear made of natural materials.

The feet of young children may be unstable because of muscle problems which may make walking difficult or uncomfortable. A thorough examination by a podiatrist may detect any underlying defects or conditions which may require immediate treatment or consultation.

Once the child is ready for shoes, to get the right size, make sure there is  $\frac{1}{2}$ " space between the child's longest toe and the end

of the shoe. Remember that it's natural for small children to curl their toes when trying on new shoes. To get the right width, see that you can pinch a small amount of the shoe upper across the top of the foot. If you have a toddler, check shoe fit every three or four months since children's feet grow rapidly.

The type of shoe you pick is important to ensure proper fit. Shoes should have thin, soft soles and be flexible enough to bend very easily across the ball of the foot. Flexible soles help children develop their sense of balance. Shop at stores with experienced sales people that feature a wide selection of footwear styles, sizes and widths. Do not assume a given size will fit the same for different brands of shoes. Avoid man-made materials because they limit breathability. Hand me down clothes are great—but not shoes. Second hand shoes can create improper balance because they may have worn out unevenly by the previous owner.

Some foot problems require professional help. Infants' feet that curve excessively inwards or outwards can be corrected with shoes that are modified and fitted with arch support. By age three, when children develop a heel to toe gait, excessively flat feet should be fit by a podiatrist with a custom molded shoe insert (orthotic) or a pre-fabricated insert to assist bones to develop in correct alignment. Infants and toddlers feet are normally fat, flat and flexible. Normally, these qualities decrease until about age seven.

Children's feet grow rapidly during the first year, sometimes reaching almost half their adult foot size. This is why podiatrists consider the first year to be the most important in the development of the feet. With a well coordinated effort between parents, podiatrists and shoe fitters, you can ensure that your child gets the right shoe to keep them happy and active as they grow and play.



### Orthotics for Your Kids

Orthotics are shoe inserts that are intended to correct an abnormal, or irregular walking pattern. They perform functions that make standing, walking, and running more comfortable and efficient by altering slightly the angles at which the foot strikes a walking or running surface. As such, orthotics are often effective in the treatment of children with foot deformities or to improve foot performance for some athletes.

If a podiatrist determines that your child needs to be fitted for

orthotics, those orthotics will usually need to be replaced when the child's foot has grown two sizes. Different types of orthotics may be needed as the child's foot develops and changes shape.

The length of time a child needs orthotics varies considerably, depending on the seriousness of the deformity and how soon the correction is addressed. Ask your podiatrist to evaluate your child's feet to determine if they need orthotics at your back to school visit.