

Low Muscle Tone

What is muscle tone?

Muscle tone refers to the resting state of your muscles and how quickly and easily they contract on command. It is often considered to be low, normal, or high depending on the resting tension in muscles. When a child has normal muscle tone, there is the right amount of tension in muscles at rest that when prompted to perform an action, it is relatively easy for him or her to turn on the necessary muscles in order to complete the task.

What is low muscle tone or hypotonia?

When a child has low muscle tone, it means he or she has to put in much more energy and effort in order to get muscles to turn on and to do what he or she want them to do. There is not as much tension in the muscles at rest and often they seem floppy or squishable. To give you some perspective, imagine sinking into a soft squishy couch after a long day and then being called by someone to come to another room. You would really have to rev up the energy to stand up. That is the challenge a child with low tone faces every time he or she moves making daily tasks much more effortful.

What are signs and symptoms of low muscle tone or hypotonia?

- Difficulty maintaining head control
- Difficulty sitting upright without significant lean or support
- Slow to attain motor milestones
- Difficulty transitioning in and out of positions
- Clumsy or inefficient movement patterns
- Global developmental delay
- Difficulty with hand eye coordination
- Prefer to observe rather than participate
- Low frustration tolerance with physically challenging tasks

How does low muscle tone relate to strength and endurance?

The level of muscle tone determines the ease to which muscles can be turned on. Since children with low tone have to work exceptionally hard to move, movement may occur less often or through a smaller range resulting in reduced opportunity to build strength, which is the ability to generate force, and endurance, which is the ability to sustain it.

What treatment options are available?

Pediatric physical therapists are movement specialists who work with children with low tone to help them build strength and endurance through exercise and movement programs. They use their expertise to find the right challenge for each child and creativity to make it both fun and motivating. Since it is harder to move, often these children need lots of practice, help and support, and motivation to get moving!