

## Preventing Positional Plagiocephaly



A parent's guide to protecting their baby's head shape and encouraging development

### What is plagiocephaly?

Positional plagiocephaly (sometimes known as "Flat head syndrome") is a cosmetic condition that makes the rounded shape of a baby's head appear flattened at the back or side.

It is quite common, and in most cases corrects itself as a child gets older and is able to change his or her position more easily.

### What are the symptoms?

There are no symptoms with plagiocephaly, other than a flattened appearance to the back or side of the head. It does not affect the baby's brain, and it should not affect health, but you should **always check with a doctor:**

- If you continue to be worried about your baby's head shape, especially if you are concerned it might be affecting his health and development
- If your baby has difficulty turning his head from side to side, or has tightening of the muscles in his neck, as referral to a physiotherapist may be necessary before the head shape can improve

## What causes it?

The skull is made up of several 'plates' of bone which, when we are born, are not tightly joined together. As we grow older, they gradually fuse, but when we are young, they are soft enough to be moulded, and this means the shape of the head can be altered by pressure on it to give a flattened look.

Plagiocephaly can be caused by a baby's position in the womb, but more commonly it is caused by the position a baby lies in after birth.

The **Back to Sleep** campaign advises parents that babies should always sleep on their backs to reduce the risk of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome ("Cot death"). As a result babies now spend much of their early lives lying on their backs e.g. when sleeping, and when sitting in car seats and bouncy chairs.

Lying in the same position for a long time can cause the bones of a baby's skull to be altered into a different shape (flattened) because of the pressure from the surface they are resting on.

**It is important that your baby always sleeps on his back** but there are things you can do to help prevent plagiocephaly, or stop it getting worse.

## What can you do?

When your baby is awake he should spend time in different positions. This will avoid constant pressure on one part of the head. It will also strengthen his neck and back muscles, and improve movement skills (rolling, crawling, sitting and standing).

- Make **Tummy Time** part of your baby's daily routine from birth. Start with just a minute or two, and gradually increase the time as your baby learns to like it. It is normal for babies to cry at first. You could try placing your baby on his front, putting a rolled up towel under his chest and arms for support. Or lie your baby on his tummy over your knees. Make it fun (play peek-a-boo, use toys).
  - **Always** supervise your baby when he is playing on his tummy
  - **Never** allow your baby to fall asleep on his tummy
- Allow your baby plenty of time sitting on your knee. Play or read to him to keep him interested
- Try holding your baby in different positions, or carry him in a sling or front carrier
- If your baby always faces one side when in his cot place a mobile or picture on the other side to encourage him to turn his head
- Only sit him in a car seat when travelling
- Limit time in bouncy chairs
- Change the position of the light or toys/mobiles in the room to the side your baby favours less

When your baby is asleep on his back:

- Gently turn his head so that he is not always lying on the same part of his skull

When your baby is feeding:

- Alternate the side your baby is facing (breast fed babies are less likely to develop plagiocephaly because their position is changed more often during feeding. Bottle-fed babies tend to be fed from the same side).

### **Helmets and bands**

There has been a lot of discussion about the use of helmets for severe flattening of the head. At the present time there is not much good scientific evidence to support how effective this method really is. This is why helmets are not available on the NHS. Most babies' head shapes will improve naturally in their own time.

Further information can be obtained from:

- Your Health Visitor, GP or Midwife
- NHS Direct – [www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk](http://www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk)
- The Foundation for the Study of Infant Deaths – [www.fsid.org.uk](http://www.fsid.org.uk)
- Great Ormond Street Hospital – [www.ich.ucl.ac.uk/factsheets/families](http://www.ich.ucl.ac.uk/factsheets/families)

### **Tummy to play. Back to sleep.**

Babies should always sleep on their back; but placing them on their tummies when they are awake and supervised will help to prevent flattening of the head (positional plagiocephaly) and stimulate learning and development.