

***What you should
know about the
shape of your
baby's head***



**Prevention of
Positional Head
Flattening for the
Younger Baby**

www.healthunit.com

Why do some babies get a flat area on their head?

- Some babies may develop flattening of the head if they spend too much time in a car seat or baby seat.
- Some babies are born with flat areas on their head from their position in the womb. For example, twin babies do not have as much room to change positions.
- Some babies keep their heads to one side because of a neck muscle problem called "torticollis."
- Premature babies have softer skull bones.
- Some babies spend too much time lying on their back when they are awake.



Flattening across
the back of the head



Flattening to one side
of the back of the head



Normal
head shape

To reduce the risk of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS), it is recommended that babies be placed on their back to sleep on a firm surface.

Babies who lie in one position for long periods of time can develop a flat area on their head. A baby's skull bones are soft until about one year of age. The medical term for this is positional plagiocephaly. A flat area can develop over a few weeks or several months.

Prevention tips for parents and caregivers

When your baby is sleeping:

Place your baby's head in different positions for sleep. For example, position your baby's head to look to one side, then the following night position his head to look in the other direction.

- Change your baby's direction in the crib on a daily basis. For example, every other day, place your baby's head near the foot of the crib.

When your baby is awake:

All healthy babies, when they are **awake** and **supervised**, need to spend time playing on their tummies or their side every day. This helps your baby to:

- develop strong muscles in their upper body,
- learn to reach, roll over, crawl, and
- eventually, sit and stand.



Most parents will tell you they avoid putting their babies on their tummies, or on the floor to play. Some parents explain their babies do not like it and they fuss or start to cry.

Tips to help younger babies learn to like floor play and tummy time play.

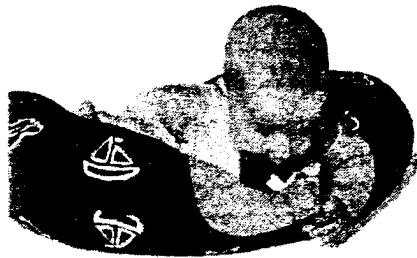
- Provide **supervised** "tummy time" and "side-lying-play" several times a day when your baby is **awake**. **Never** let your baby fall asleep on his tummy. Think of "tummy time" as "play time" for your baby. It should be part of your daily routine with your baby.
- Start "tummy time" early, as soon as the umbilical cord has fallen off. Begin with short periods of time, for example less than 1 minute then gradually increase the time. Remember a few seconds to your baby is a long time. A good time to try placing your baby on their tummy is when they are in a quiet alert phase. You may want to try this after their bath or after a diaper change.



★ Tummy to play, ba

Be patient with your baby. If your baby cries or fusses, stop and try again later. An unhappy, crying baby is letting you know they do not want to do this now but may be okay to try this activity at another time. **Don't give up!** Parents need to respond to their baby's cries by comforting their baby. Continue to provide "tummy time" as the baby tolerates it.

Try to lay your baby on their stomach on your lap or your chest. Young babies will accept lying on their tummy when in a slanted, upright position. **Remember** do not sleep with your baby in this position. If you choose to place your baby on a flat surface, make sure the surface is not too hard, and always stay with your baby. You can also place a small rolled blanket or towel under their chest.



ck to sleep ★

5

**Babies who move their necks
with ease will be more likely to
develop a normal head shape.**

- Encourage your baby to turn her neck from side-to-side and to look at you by using your voice or their favourite toy.



- Change arms each time you carry or feed your baby. This will encourage your baby to move their head in different directions.
- If your baby prefers to turn his head to one side only, encourage him to turn his head to the other side as often as possible throughout the day.
- Speak with your doctor if your baby's neck is very stiff, or if your baby tilts his or her head to one side. Your doctor can show you simple stretch exercises to do at home, or refer the baby to see a physiotherapist.

What if your baby has a flat area on his/her head?

- Babies who have developed a flat area on their head need to be off that flat area as much as possible. Talk to your doctor or public health nurse if you are worried about the shape of your baby's head after six weeks of age. They can give you instructions and guidance on how to position your baby.
- Babies who have developed a severely flattened area that does not correct itself with positioning exercises, should be referred to a specialist. The specialist may recommend that your baby wear a molding helmet.

Does Positional Plagiocephaly cause problems?

In most cases, having a flattened area on their head will not affect the baby's brain growth or mental development. Parents often find that their baby's head shape improves quickly with proper positioning. A round-shaped head is best for normal appearance.

Web Sites:

- www.plagiocephaly.org
- www.cranialtech.com
- www.caringforkids.cps.ca
- www.ottawa.ca/health

Plagiocephaly References:

Najarian, S. (1999) Infant Cranial Molding Deformation and sleep position: Implications for Primary Care. *Journal of Pediatric Health Care*, 13, 4, 173-177.

Neufeld, S. and Birkett, S. (1999). Positional plagiocephaly: A community approach to prevention and treatment. *Alberta RN*, 55, 1, 15-16

Rekate, H. (1998). Occipital plagiocephaly: a critical review of the literature. *Journal of Neurosurgery*, 89, 24-30.

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8

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