

What is plagiocephaly?

Positional plagiocephaly (sometimes known as "Flat head syndrome") is a cosmetic condition where the rounded shape of a baby's head becomes 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 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 a baby's brain, and it does not affect their health.

Checking with a doctor is always advisable if:

- You feel that the problem is significant and you continue to be worried
- You are worried that there is an additional problem, such as a health or development concern
- Your baby has difficulty turning their head from side to side, or has tightening of the neck muscles, 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 a baby's head shape to become flattened because of the pressure from the surface it is resting on.

It is important that babies always sleep on their back but there are things you can do to help prevent plagiocephaly, or stop it getting worse.

What can you do?

When awake your baby should spend time in different positions. This will avoid constant pressure on one part of the head. It will also strengthen the 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/her front, putting a rolled up towel under the chest and arms for support. Or lie your baby on their tummy over your knees. Make it fun (play peek-a-boo, use toys).

Always supervise your baby when they are playing on their tummy
Never allow your baby to fall asleep when lying on their tummy

- Allow your baby plenty of time sitting on your knee. Play or read together to keep it interesting.
 - Try holding your baby in different positions, or carry your baby in a sling or front carrier
 - If your baby always faces one side when lying in the cot place a mobile or picture on the other side to encourage him/her to turn and face the other way
 - 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 their back
- Gently turn his/her head so that he/she is not always lying on the same part of the 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 little good scientific evidence to support how effective this method really is. This is why helmet use is not advised by many doctors and is not currently available on the NHS. Most babies' head shapes will improve naturally in their own time.

- Only sit your baby in a car seat when travelling
- Limit time in bouncy chairs

Further information can be obtained from:

Your Health Visitor, GP or Midwife

NHS Direct - www.nhsdirect.nhs.uk

The Foundation for the Study of Infant Deaths - www.fsid.org.uk

Great Ormond Street Hospital - www.ich.ucl.ac.uk/factsheets/families

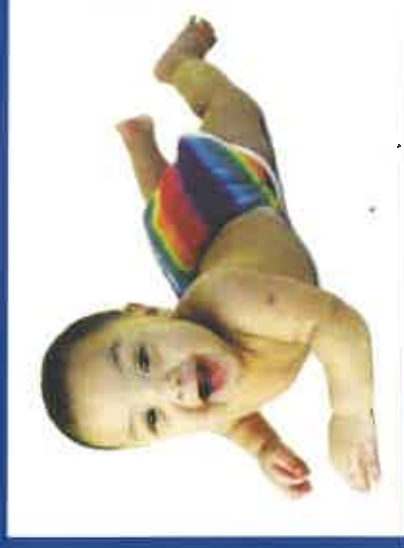


Tummy to play. Back to sleep.

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)

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Preventing Positional Plagiocephaly



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