

Preventing and treating your baby's flat head

A family guide to Plagiocephaly



An agency of the Provincial
Health Services Authority

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You can prevent your baby's head from shaping flat

Until about 1 year of age a baby's head shape is flexible and can become flat and uneven if a baby likes to look in one direction or is always on his or her back.

You can prevent this. The main way is to change your baby's sleep and play position often during the day and night. Here are some specific ways how to do this:

- ▶ Sleep your baby on his or her back, but make sure your baby's head is in a different position each time he or she sleeps such as the right side, straight forward, left side. TIP: you can turn a young baby's head once they are sound asleep.
- ▶ Switch the end you put your baby down in the crib each night.
- ▶ Play with your baby on his or her tummy and sides 3 to 5 times a day. Some tummy time tips are given later.
- ▶ Change toy and mobile positions every few days so that your baby does not always look in one direction.
- ▶ Keep the infant car seat in the car. Move your baby out of the car seat when not in the car. Avoid using car seats in strollers. Instead lie your young baby down flat in a stroller. TIP: Babies can sit up in a stroller between 5 to 6 months of age.
- ▶ Limit time spent in swings, recliner or bouncy seats. Avoid letting your baby nap in these.
- ▶ See your doctor if you notice that your baby always turns or tilts his or her head to one side. Your baby may need stretching exercises.

The rate of SIDS, also called Sudden Infant Death Syndrome, has greatly decreased since parents and caregivers have put their babies to sleep on their backs. It is still important to put babies to sleep on their backs. The Canadian Paediatric Society also recommends that quilts, pillows and rolls, blankets and bumper pads not be used in cribs.

What if your baby already has a flat spot?

Changing your baby's position can help improve his or her head shape.

Position your baby off the flat area as much as possible.

Keep using the ideas listed above, as well as:

- ▶ Move the crib so that your baby turns his or her head away from the "flat" side when looking toward the door.
- ▶ Place toys and mobiles on the "round" side so your baby turns away from the flat side.
- ▶ Carry and hold your baby on the round side to avoid pressure on the flat area.
- ▶ If you bottle feed your baby, feed from the round side. Breast fed babies already change sides when they feed. When introducing solid foods, spoon feed your baby from the round side rather than "face on".
- ▶ Carry your baby. Use a front or side carrier with a padded waist strap. Play with your baby in different positions. Every baby, no matter how old she or he is, needs tummy time 3 to 5 times a day. Some tummy time tips are given later.
- ▶ Here are some play ideas for babies of different ages.
 - **For babies under 3 to 4 months:** Your baby will be learning to hold his or her head up, but is not able to move or sit. When awake and supervised place a small rolled blanket under your young baby's shoulder on the same side as the flat area. This will help turn your baby's head away from the flat side. Carry your baby over your shoulder so he or she looks out to the round side.
 - **For babies 3 to 4 months and older:** Your baby will be learning to use his sitting muscles, getting ready for rolling and sitting later on. Once your baby has good head control sit him or her on your lap or in a baby "sitter" on the floor such as a BUMBO™ seat. TIP: Put the play gym in front of your baby so he or she has toys in front to play with.
 - **For babies 5 to 6 months and older:** Your baby will be learning to sit on his or her own and will enjoy supported standing. Place a nursing pillow behind him or her in sitting for support and cushioning. Slowly start to use an exersaucer or floor jumper.

This Health Canada Website has safety information on baby equipment and products such as carriers, baby jumpers, activity centres and more. <http://www.hc-sc.gc.ca/cps-spc/pubs/cons/index-eng.php>

Tummy Time Tips:

- ▶ Start with short periods, but do often during the day. It takes time for babies to get comfortable and strong on their tummies. An example is to put your baby on his or her tummy for 1 to 2 minutes after each diaper change. Add a little extra time each day.
- ▶ Use a firm padded play surface such as carpeted flooring or an activity or yoga mat.
- ▶ Get down on the floor with your baby.
- ▶ Distract your baby. Have a basket of brightly coloured toys, books or mirrors at hand to help get his or her attention.

TIP: Play peek-a-boo games in front of your baby or using a baby mirror.

- ▶ Encourage your baby with songs, praise and touch.
- ▶ Do not force your baby to stay on his or her tummy when he or she is upset. Pick up for a comfort cuddle and try again later.
- ▶ This website shows many different pictures and tips for tummy time: <http://www.pathwaysawareness.org/for-parents>

- ▶ Give your baby support by putting a rolled towel under his or her chest. Prop your baby's arms in front of the towel.



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Phone: 800-955-2445 Email: friends@pathways.org

Try different ways to do tummy time:

- ▶ Lie down flat and have your baby lie on your chest.



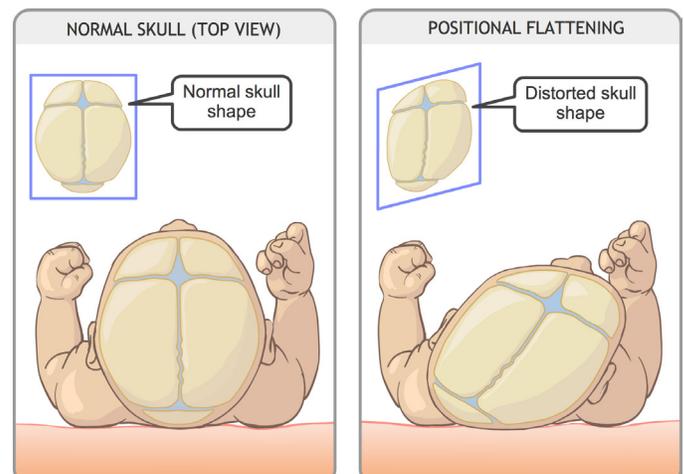
- ▶ Place your baby over your legs while you are sitting.



Is there a medical term for flattening on the back of the head in babies, caused by lying in the same position?

Yes. It is called “Positional Plagiocephaly” (play-gee-o-seff-ah-lee). A flat area can develop quickly over a few weeks or may take several months.

Having positional plagiocephaly can affect a baby's appearance. It causes the head and face to grow unevenly. A small number of babies with plagiocephaly may be slower in learning to move.



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How common is it?

Many babies are born with a flat spot on their head. Most round out by 5 to 6 months of age. For some this takes longer. For a few babies the flattening is more severe and doesn't improve on its own.

Some babies are more at risk. These are babies who:

- ▶ like to turn their head to the same side.
- ▶ are born with flat areas on their heads from their position in the womb. An example would be twin babies who don't have as much room.
- ▶ keep their heads to one side because of a tight neck muscle called torticollis.
- ▶ are born premature and have softer skull bones.
- ▶ have larger sized heads or who take longer to learn to roll.



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When should I be concerned?

- ▶ If you notice your baby always turns or tilts his or her head to one side, or has trouble turning the other way ask your doctor to check your baby's neck motion. Your baby may need to see a physiotherapist for stretches and exercises.
- ▶ If you are worried about your baby's head shape after 4 months of age and have tried the tips already given about repositioning speak with your doctor or community health nurse. Some babies have severe positional plagiocephaly that does not correct with position changes. These babies may need to see a specialist or come to the Plagiocephaly Clinic at BC Children's Hospital.



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Headbands / helmets

When would it be used?

- ▶ It is an option if positioning doesn't help, and your baby has severe flattening and an uneven face.

What is it and how does it work?

- ▶ This is a custom fitted helmet. It works by putting gentle pressure on the round parts of the head so that the flat areas grow out. It works best if treatment is started at 6 months of age. This treatment must be started before 12 months as the bones in the head start to fuse and become harder. Headbands are generally worn 23 hours a day for 6 months. The cost is not covered by the provincial Medical Services Plan (MSP). Some funding coverage may be available from Pharmacare or extended health plans.

Have more questions? It's good to ask.



Contact the Occupational Health Department:
604-875-2123

Weblinks:

http://www.caringforkids.cps.ca/handouts/preventing_flat_heads

<http://pathways.org/awareness/parents/tummy-time/>

http://www.aboutkidshealth.ca_search/Flattened-Head