

Plagiocephaly (Positional) in Babies

Definition

- Plagiocephaly is a flat area on a baby's head.
- Baby's head position before or after birth can cause this flattening. That's why it's also called "positional plagiocephaly."
- Up to 25% of babies have positional plagiocephaly. Most often it's mild.
- This medical diagnosis was made by a doctor after seeing your baby.

Health Information

Symptoms

- **Head shape.** Baby's head looks misshapen. There's a flat spot on the back or the side of the head. Most often this shows up 1 to 2 months after birth.
- **Facial features.** The face also can look uneven. The forehead often looks larger on the same side that is flat in back.
- Plagiocephaly does not cause any brain damage. It's just the shape of the skull that's uneven.

Causes

- **Soft skull bones.** Babies have soft skull bones. They are easily molded, especially in the first few months of life. More pressure on an area of the skull can flatten it.
- **Certain positions.** Too much time lying on the back can flatten the head. Limited tummy time contributes to this.
- **Torticollis.** Plagiocephaly may be related to torticollis (tight neck muscles on one side). For details, see the Torticollis in Babies handout.
- **Prematurity.** Premature babies' skulls are less developed and softer. These babies also spend more time lying down while in the hospital.
- **Womb position.** Crowding or position in the womb can sometimes cause plagiocephaly. This is more common with twins.

Medical Diagnosis: How It's Made

- Your doctor can diagnose the harmless positional type of plagiocephaly with a physical exam.

Care Advice

1. Key Points

- Plagiocephaly is a flat area on baby's head. It's most often from lying on the back too much.
- Changing baby's position helps plagiocephaly get better.
- Here's some home care advice that should help.

2. Keep Baby Upright More When Awake

- Reduce time baby spends lying on their back.
- Avoid too much time in car seats, swings, or bouncers.
- Hold baby upright more.
- Carry baby more often. Wear baby in a carrier. Use a carrier that's safe for baby's size.

3. **Do Tummy Time Daily**

- Tummy time is a brief period when a baby lies on their belly. This takes pressure off baby's head.
- Tummy time should only occur with adult supervision while baby is awake.
- Do tummy time on a flat, safe surface. You can also have baby lie on your chest.
- Start tummy time when baby is 2 weeks old. At first, do 15 to 30 seconds each time. As baby becomes stronger, tummy time can become longer.
- Encourage baby to lift their head. Get their attention with toys, your face, or your voice.
- For details, see the Tummy Time handout.

4. **Position Baby Correctly When Lying Down**

- Put baby to sleep on their back. Position them so they must turn their head away from the flat area to see the room.
- Lay them down with the head closest to the bottom of the crib rather than the top.
- If they are in a swing, bouncer or car seat, encourage them to lay off their flat spot. Sit on the side that makes them turn away from their flat spot. This is the opposite of how they like to turn.
- Never use pillows, towels, or toys to position your baby during sleep. Reason: they can block baby's breathing.
- Remember, safe sleep is on a flat firm surface with baby on their back. For details, see the Safe Sleep to Prevent SIDS handout.

5. **Let Baby's Head Move**

- Play with baby when they're lying down and awake. Get their attention with toys, moving the toys around to help baby move their head.
- Attract baby's attention with hanging mobiles or lights. This helps them move their head around.
- Avoid too much time in swings, bouncers, or car seats. Reason: these limit baby's head movement.
- Hold and carry your baby more. Reason: so the back of their head is not pressed against anything.

6. **What To Expect**

- Plagiocephaly gets better with position changes. Start doing these activities early.
- With these techniques, plagiocephaly often gets better in a few months. Severe flat spots may take a year to smooth out.
- Some babies may need treatment from a physical therapist. Your doctor can help decide.

Call Your Doctor If

- You are worried about your baby's development
- You think your baby needs to be seen
- You have other questions or concerns

Pediatric Care Advice

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