

An Overview of Baby Head Shape

by Caroline Rhodes, P.T.

What are Plagiocephaly and Brachycephaly?

Plagiocephaly and **Brachycephaly** are terms that are used to describe a flat or misshapen head. **Plagiocephaly** means that there is a flat spot on one side, on the back of the head. This often causes the bones on the same side as the flat spot to move forward, resulting in an asymmetrical head and face. The side with the flat spot will have an ear, forehead and cheek bone that protrudes forward. **Brachycephaly** means that there is a flat spot in the center of the back of the head. This condition is not usually characterized by asymmetry of the ears and facial bones.

What causes a misshapen head?

Misshapen heads have become markedly more common, following the launch of the Back To Sleep Program designed to prevent Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS). There has been around a 40% decrease in SIDS since infants have been put to sleep on their back rather than their stomachs.

Torticollis is another typical cause. This is used to describe a condition when a child has a spasm in his neck and cannot turn his head equally in both directions, resulting in a preference to look only one way. **Torticollis** needs to be corrected, as the head and face will be crooked. There can be many reasons for this, and it is best to see a trained practitioner so the child can be assessed, and treatment begin as soon as possible.

Another cause can be general misalignment of the body. There are various reasons for this, including a large baby being born from a small maternal pelvis, or multiple infants (twins etc), leading to crowding in the womb. Occasionally, one twin is more compressed than the other. Sometimes a baby's head is stuck in its mother's pelvis or under her ribs, and the baby does not have much freedom of movement. With one infant patient, it was possible to see where the maternal ribs had pressed into the top of the baby's head. When a baby has a twisted pelvis, the head and neck will also be twisted; these are the basic biomechanics of the spine.

A further reason can be a difficult or assisted delivery, such as ventouse or forceps. Forceps can leave an impression on the bones of the head, and ventouse can cause elongation of the head. Sometimes it will correct itself, depending on the amount of force that was used in delivering the baby safely.

Infants from orphanages have more brachycephaly. I believe this is because they are not picked up as much, and lie on their backs most of the time.

Mothers often assume that baby's condition is somehow their fault, wrongly believing the way they hold their baby or wash his hair is responsible. This is certainly not the case.

Some believe the condition is hereditary, when it can actually result from a normal delivery. For example, one eye can be smaller and higher on the face; this is actually a facial slant. The facial bones drag along the mother's tail bone and depending on the size of the head, the size of the pelvis and the position of the tailbone, there will be a more prominent facial slant. Around 70% of facial slants occur on the left side, as most natural deliveries lead with this side. Often the bone on the back of head will also rotate, causing a less rounded skull.

Prevention

Crying & Sucking

Crying and sucking both help to shape a baby's head. If using a bottle to feed baby, make him work harder by using a slow flow teat. This will contract the connective tissue, helping to shape the head.

Check Your Baby's Alignment

Get a professional to check out your baby's alignment after a few weeks of age. This gives the body and head a chance to stretch out and reshape. If this does not happen, have someone trained in working with infants check and treat any misalignment of the pelvis, spine or head. If you had a c-section with no complications and the head shape is perfect, arrange to see a therapist trained in head shaping if it suddenly starts to become flat.

Tummy Time

Make sure baby has tummy time six times per day. You should do this for as long as he can tolerate it, even if it is only for 30 seconds. This not only takes pressure off the back of the head, but also strengthens the neck muscles to help with reshaping the head. Many of the neck muscles are attached to the sides of the face and skull.

Head Brace/Helmet

Head braces or helmets are used most commonly in the USA. Patients are typically children with misshapen heads that did not correct naturally over time, or had no treatment to correct the alignment. These are not fitted on children less than eight months of age. The helmet is worn for about 9-12 months, 23 hours a day, and requires adjustments every six weeks or so.

Other Tips

- Alternate sleeping positions from back to side, to the other side.
- Do not let your baby stay in a car seat or stroller for long periods of time.
- If you bottle feed, alternate the sides on which you hold your baby.

When should I seek help?

If you are concerned about your child, be proactive and seek help. A child does not outgrow this condition, although it may improve slightly with time. When a child grows hair it is less noticeable, but the problem is still there, so the sooner you seek treatment, the better.

An infant has seven soft spots in his head, and there is a lot of movement between the skull bones. The first one starts to fuse after two months; this is the forehead, which is in two pieces in a child. I have seen MANY children come in for head shaping between the ages of nine months and 30 months; it is too late to achieve significant change, but some valid work can still be done. It can also be time consuming with a toddler who cannot lie still, so the treatment takes longer. The earlier you seek treatment, the more effective it will be.

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