

## Child health information factsheet

# Torticollis and preferential head turn

The first signs of torticollis or preferential head turn can be noticed within the first few weeks of life.

You may notice that your baby tends to look more in one direction than the other.



The muscle affected is called the sternocleidomastoid, and joins the base of the skull to the collarbone.

In babies with torticollis, this muscle is shorter on one side so they lie with their head tilted to one side and rotated to the other.

With treatment, the muscle will grow and stretch. If left untreated the condition may cause a permanent limitation of the baby's neck movement, which may need surgery.

### The cause

There are several ideas about what causes torticollis in babies, but the main one is the limitation of space inside the mother's uterus.

The baby may be stuck in one position for a period of time and not be able to move its neck. This can affect how the muscle is formed making it stiff and tight. The muscle on the opposite side can also become stretched and weak.

Until about one year of age the bones of a baby's head are very thin and flexible, making it soft and easy to mould.

Therefore a condition known as positional or deformational plagiocephaly (when one side of the head does not match up with other side) can happen.

During most normal births a newborn head may appear pointy or elongated for a short time after passage through the birth canal.

This usually corrects itself within six weeks after birth. If your baby prefers to look in one direction part of the skull may become flat.



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It is important to remember plagiocephaly does not affect the development of a baby's brain.

## How to help

All of the following advice is to encourage your baby to turn their head towards the side they normally avoid.

It is important you continue with these until your baby turns their head equally in both directions to prevent development of a plagiocephaly or facial asymmetry (when one side of the face does not match up with the other side).

You may also be referred to see your local physiotherapist for further advice.

- When your baby is in the cot try placing them so they have to turn towards you when you walk in the room
- Remember tummy time is important and should be part of every babies daily routine as it encourages head turning and control



- When cuddling your baby against your shoulder if he or she doesn't like looking to the left, place on the right shoulder or if he or she doesn't like looking to the right, place on the left shoulder as babies tend to look outwards in this position



- Sometimes it can be helpful to turn your baby on to their side and then gradually let their body come onto his or her back leaving the head turned the way you want. This works best if you use a toy to distract your baby.

The FSID (Foundation for the study of infant deaths) created a back to sleep, front to play campaign in 2006, the leaflet can viewed at [www.sids.org.uk/front-play-campaign.html](http://www.sids.org.uk/front-play-campaign.html)

## If you have any questions or concerns please contact

Paediatric physiotherapy department, B level, west wing, Southampton General Hospital  
Tel: **023 8079 4560**

**If you need a translation of this document, an interpreter or a version in large print, Braille or on audio tape, please telephone 023 8079 4688 for help.**