General Information

Chartered Physiotherapists are health professionals allied to the Medical Profession and carry a university qualification. The title “Chartered Physiotherapist” and the initials “M.I.S.C.P.” indicate that a physiotherapist is a member of the professional regulating body the Irish Society of Chartered Physiotherapists (ISCP). Chartered Physiotherapists work in hospitals, the community and in private practices.

Further Treatment

If you are concerned about the shape of your baby’s head or your baby has difficulty turning their head to either side, speak to your local GP or Public Health Nurse (PHN) as soon as possible and they will arrange for further assessment and treatment for your child if required.

You can directly contact a Chartered Physiotherapist or your G.P. can refer you for a consultation.

Contact

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Irish Society of
Chartered
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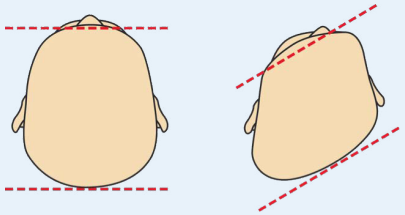
Positional Plagiocephaly
An Information leaflet
for Families

Positional plagiocephaly is the term we use when an area at the back or side of a baby's head becomes flattened



Sample of Plagiocephaly (Misshapen head)

Newborn babies have very soft skulls which are susceptible to being moulded or flattened. If a baby spends a lot of time in one position, the constant pressure on that part of the skull can lead it to become flattened.

Reasons why babies can develop a flattened area on the skull:

- Preference to turn their head to one side.
- Tight muscles on one side. This is called a torticollis and can affect how well a baby can turn their head.
- Conditions that delay a baby developing head control and ability to turn their head from side to side.
- Prematurity-babies born too soon have softer skulls which are more prone to moulding.
- Lack of tummy time-all babies should sleep on their backs but should spend time on their tummy regularly when awake.

Baby seats/ Bouncer seats

Avoid letting your baby sleep in their bouncer seat. Place them in their seat only when you are happy they have enough head control to hold their head in midline rather than to one side. Monitor their head position while in the bouncer as they may start to tilt or turn to the flattened side when tired.

Physiotherapy

If your baby develops a positional plagiocephaly your Chartered Physiotherapist can give you advice to help improve your baby's head shape. Physiotherapy can also be helpful for children who have difficulty turning their head to one side due to tight muscles (Torticollis). The sooner their head turns as easily one way as the other, the sooner the natural correction of head shape can begin.

Helmets

The use of helmets is not endorsed by the National Paediatric Craniofacial Centre, as at the time of print the scientific evidence shows that helmets are no more effective than the methods described above.

Pillows

The Irish SIDS guidelines do not recommend having anything soft, including pillows, in the cot when your baby is asleep unsupervised.

What is the outlook for my baby?

For your baby's head to become more round, the pressure, causing the plagiocephaly in the first place, needs to be removed or reduced. As your baby becomes more active (for example: rolling, sitting and crawling) and spends less time lying in the same position, their head will begin to change shape.

Most cases of plagiocephaly round out by the time the baby is two years of age and even after this there is still plenty of scope for the head to re-shape. A degree of flattening can remain but this is not usually obvious once hair has grown and the size of the baby's head is more in proportion to their body.

However, the earlier steps are taken to prevent/treat the flattening, the easier to prevent the condition developing.

Carrying positions and feeding

Try to carry your baby in different positions (i.e. alternate the hip/arm you hold them in) to encourage them to look both directions equally.

Whether you breast or bottle feed your baby, change the arm you hold your baby in, to make sure they are turning their head both ways.

If your baby has a favourite side to turn to, approach and feed them from their less preferred side when taking spoon feeds and sitting in a high chair.

Travelling with your baby

When in a vehicle, babies must be positioned and restrained in an appropriate car seat for their age and weight.

However, long periods positioned in a car seat can encourage or worsen flattening of the head. Try to limit the amount of time your baby spends in car seats.

- If you must make a long journey, take rest breaks, and lift your baby out of the car seat to reduce the pressure on their head.
- Consider using a colourful toy to encourage your baby to look to their less favoured side whilst in the car seat.
- When out and about avoid using the car seat but consider a pram or baby carrier/sling instead.

A note on baby carriers/slings

A baby carrier or sling may be an option for you for carrying your baby. Ensure that it is appropriate for their weight and size and that their hips and legs are well supported. Encourage your baby to turn their head to the non flattened side while in the sling.

What can I do if I notice my baby has a flattened area on their head?

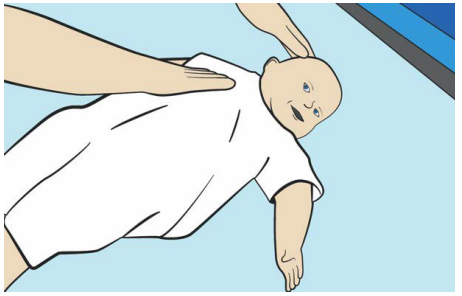
Encourage your baby to turn their head to their less favoured side as much as possible.

Babies tend to turn towards light/noise. Rearrange furniture or alternate which end of the cot you place your baby to sleep to encourage them to look towards the light/noise and away from the flattened side.

Always place your baby on their back to sleep.

After your baby has fallen asleep, gently move their head to the non preferred side to take the weight off the flattened side. To prevent SIDS (Sudden Infant Death Syndrome), babies under one year must sleep on their backs, without positioning devices or pillows that put baby at risk of overheating and suffocation.

How can I gently move my babies head away from the flattened side?



- Place your baby in side lying on the non-flattened side of their head
- Allow them to settle for a moment or engage with a toy if awake.
- Gently roll their body so they lie on their back (chest up).
- They should end up on their back with their head turned to the non flattened side.

Positioning for “Awake” time

Tummy time and side lying positions can help your baby learn and grow stronger while taking the pressure off the flattened part of their skull.

Playing with your baby in different positions can help them to learn to move, communicate, socialise and understand their surroundings.

Side Lying

Lying your baby on their side, with a pillow behind them to prevent them from rolling back can offload the flattened part of the skull. This is also a nice position for your baby to learn to bring their hands together for play.

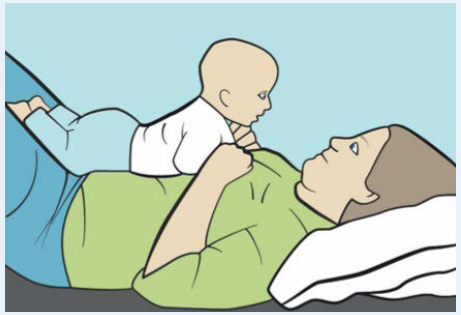
It is important your baby is awake and supervised while they are on their tummy or in side lying. Always place your baby on their back to sleep.

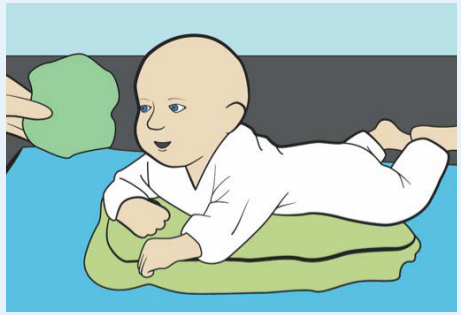
Tummy Time

Tummy time will help your baby build up the strength in their neck muscles and will off load the flattened part of the skull.

Try to do tummy time regularly throughout the day. Use a reminder such as after a nappy change or before a feed so that it becomes part of your daily routine.

In the early days you can do tummy time lying on your chest or lying on your lap.



Carrying your baby in a tummy down position along your forearm is another nice way of bringing tummy time into your day.

As your baby gets older use a play mat and encourage your baby to push through their arms to look around and lift their head up. You can start by placing a small rolled towel under their chest to help them lift their head and shoulders. Use bright toys, mirrors or musical toys to encourage them to lift and turn their head from side to side.