

Flat Head Syndrome in Babies

What is flat head syndrome?

Babies sometimes develop a flattened head when they're a few months old. This is known as flat head syndrome.

These problems are quite common, affecting around 1 in every 5 babies at some point.

In most cases they aren't a major cause for concern, as they don't have any effect on the brain and the head shape will often improve by itself over time.

Your baby won't experience any pain or other symptoms, or any problems with their general development.

What causes it?

The skull is made up of plates of bone that strengthen and join together as a child gets older.

A young baby's skull is still relatively soft and can change shape if there's constant pressure on a particular part of their head.

Reasons why this may happen include:

- sleeping on their back – the back or side of a baby's head can become flattened as a result of always sleeping on their back, but it's very important they do this for safety reasons

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- problems in the womb – pressure can be placed on a baby's head before it's born if the baby is a bit squashed in the womb or there's a lack of amniotic fluid to cushion the baby.

Rarely, a flattened head can be caused by the plates of the skull joining together too early. This is known as craniosynostosis (see below).

What are the symptoms?

- **Plagiocephaly** – flattening on one side of the head, the forehead may bulge on that side and ears may be uneven. These changes are cosmetic and have no lasting effects.
- **Brachycephaly** – flattening on the back of the head, which may appear wider and the forehead may bulge. These changes are cosmetic and have no lasting effects.
- **Craniosynostosis** – long and narrow head, pointy or triangular forehead, loss of the soft spot on the head (fontanelle) before one year of age. In severe cases, older children may experience headache, visual disturbance, developmental delay or worsening school performance. This is a rare condition.

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What can be done to help?

The shape of your baby's head should improve naturally over time as their skull develops and they start moving their head, rolling around and crawling.

To take pressure off the flattened part of your baby's head

- encourage tummy time while awake – but always put your baby to sleep on their back
- reduce the time your baby spends lying on flat surfaces, such as car seats and prams. Try using reclining chairs, slings and baby carriers to vary the pressure on their head.
- change the position of toys and mobiles in their cot – this will encourage the baby to turn their head. You can also reposition cots/changing tables.
- alternate the side you hold your baby when feeding and carrying.

What if your child doesn't get better?

- if your baby has difficulty turning their head (torticollis), physiotherapy may help loosen and strengthen their neck muscles
- there is no clear evidence that specially designed helmets and headbands work in flat head syndrome, and their use can cause skin irritation and discomfort to babies. For these reasons, they are not routinely recommended.

Speak to your health visitor or GP if

- you're concerned about the shape of your baby's head
- your baby has problems turning their head.

A slightly flattened head is usually nothing to worry about, but it's a good idea to get advice so you can take steps to stop it getting any worse. If you've followed the advice in this leaflet and the problem still persists, your GP may refer your child to a paediatric clinic.

For trusted sources of further information

<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/plagiocephaly-brachycephaly/>

<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/pregnancy-and-baby/reducing-risk-cot-death/>

<https://www.nhs.uk/conditions/craniosynostosis/>



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