

# When it comes to your baby's health, use your head.



By Geoff Kirbyson

**K**athy Mulder wants to make sure that young babies won't have difficulty fitting glasses or hockey helmets when they're older.

Physiotherapists based at the Rehabilitation Centre for Children have noticed that there are increasing numbers of babies referred for physiotherapy to deal with concerns due to plagiocephaly.

For those of you without a dictionary or access to Dr. Google, that's a flattening of the skull.

It happens when babies are put to sleep on their backs or spend too much time in their car seats and their soft skulls rest for lengthy periods on a hard surface.

For the last 20 plus years, doctors have recommended that babies be put to sleep on their back to sleep to prevent Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS). That is because many babies don't have enough strength in their necks to lift their heads and move out of harm's way if their covers get crunched up in their faces

So, what can you do to prevent plagiocephaly?

Well, firstly, babies at risk need to be identified by screen-

ing for a tendency to look only in one direction or abnormal head shape either at birth or within the first few months.

Secondly, babies should have supervised "tummy time" several times daily starting as soon as they come home from the hospital. And thirdly, parents and caregivers should minimize the unnecessary use of car seats and swings.

Mulder recommends taking the baby out of car seat as soon as you get where you are going. Once the baby can hold his or her head up – especially if they have a flat spot – consider using a baby carrier or holding the baby upright more often throughout the day to keep their head off the firm flat surface if they cannot roll or sit up by themselves yet.

If you notice a flattening at the back of a baby's skull, Mulder recommends asking your pediatrician or doctor to refer you to physiotherapy. The physiotherapist will check for muscle tightness or weakness that could be contributing to the uneven head positioning as well as the baby's developmental skills. Every baby develops on their own timetable but there are times when some steps can be taken to encourage the baby to roll over or sit up by themselves which helps to decrease the

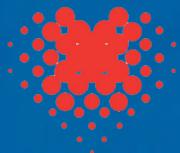
time the baby spends lying on their back.

"If they spend a lot of time on a firm surface and are always in the same position, the soft bones of the young skull will basically take on the shape of that flat surface. That flattening makes it even more difficult for the baby to turn their head from side to side." Winnipeg physiotherapists dealt with referrals for more than 500 babies with plagiocephaly in 2018, which is up several-fold from the year 2000.

How big an issue this is depends on the severity of the deformity. If it is just a small flat spot behind the ear, it's not usually a big deal. However, as it progresses one ear may shift forwards, which can have implications for their appearance and the fitting of glasses and helmets when they are older.

A baby's skull grows very quickly for the first three to four months and quite quickly up to about eight months. As the baby gets closer to year old, the growth of the skull slows down. The window of best opportunity for physiotherapists to promote head shape is during the first 12 months so early referral to physiotherapy as soon as a flat spot is identified is ideal.

YOUR PHYSIOTHERAPIST HAS THE ABILITY TO USE A BROAD RANGE OF TREATMENT TECHNIQUES TO HELP YOU GET BETTER.



Manitoba  
Physiotherapy  
Association

Association  
manitobaine de  
physiothérapie

To find a physiotherapist  
in your area, visit

[www.mbphysio.org](http://www.mbphysio.org)

Sponsored by

Manitoba Physiotherapy  
Association