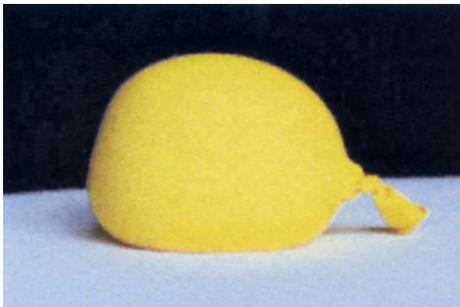


MORE ON FLAT HEAD SYNDROME

By osteopath Caroline Penn DO (Hons) MSc FSCC PHI

In response to questions from parents I would like to give some history to last month's article about babies with unevenly shaped heads, or plagiocephaly, also known as Flat Head Syndrome.

It has been known for a long time that, if you lie a baby always on one spot of the head, that part of the head will flatten. This is purely because it cannot billow out in that spot because of the weight of the head constantly on it, when lying on a hard surface, like a water filled balloon, it can flatten at the bottom.



A water filled balloon flattens on a hard surface



Less flattening on a sleep curve mattress or soft pillow

Consequently the standard advice *was* to lie babies on their backs with a pillow. However, research showed that if they were sick, there was a risk of choking. So the advice changed to lying babies on their tummies, without a pillow. Then came the worries over Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS), so the advice changed again to lying babies on their backs— but without a pillow due to the perceived risk of suffocation if the baby turns their head. The current advice in the UK is not to have any pillow in the cot.

In Sweden, however, since 2000, the Department of Health and Welfare has recommended a soft baby pillow for all newborn and young babies while sleeping on their back. These baby pillows are available in the UK (goigoibabypillows.co.uk). They are cheap and, of course, less intrusive than the remoulding orthotic bands or helmets described in last month's article. Information about other products such as Sleepcurve mattress and Lovenest pillow can be found in our leaflet.

Plagiocephaly, Re-positioning Advice www.pennclinic.co.uk

Once flat head syndrome had developed, using these aids may help in repositioning – that is encouraging the baby not to lie on the flat spot on the head so that it can billow out on its own naturally, so it's worth a try. However, once all the repositioning advice has been followed, if parents are still concerned about the shape of their baby's head, or if baby cannot turn their head equally to both sides, cranial osteopathy should be considered.

In severe cases cranial orthotic bands *may* be helpful. However, there is one more factor here that is not widely understood. As the baby grows in the womb, the base of the head - the part that joins onto

the neck - forms initially as cartilage. This is important because it is from this area that the important spinal cord, nerves and blood vessels which communicate with the rest of the body leave the head. It needs the support. The crown of the head does not form cartilage but remains as a membrane until the bone starts to be laid down in it around the time of birth. Therefore at birth the baby's head is not made of bone with soft spots as is generally thought, but rather it should be considered the other way round; it is like a soft shelled egg with stiffeners. It is clear to see therefore how this is able to distort, sometimes quite dramatically, to ease the passage of the baby into the world and then billow out normally once the baby is born. Sometimes parents can be quite alarmed at the shape of their baby's head, but on the contrary be pleased that the head is designed to distort so much to make birth possible.

The baby's head is designed to billow out naturally, however, sometimes the distortion is greater than the body's natural processes were designed to allow. If the strains of birth are greater than can be accommodated for by the distortion of the top of the head alone, some of the distortion can be forced into the cartilage of the base of the head. This is not designed to distort. This is where the nerves and blood vessels leave the head and if it is distorted there is no natural mechanism for it to rebalance itself. No wonder these children can suffer from conditions such as colic, earache, constant crying, will not settle, poor sleeping and irritability. Often the distortion shows no visible signs, sometimes one ear may be positioned further forward – this is almost always a sign that the base of the skull has been distorted. This occurs sometimes without a flat spot. It means there is distortion of the base of the cranium and treatment should be sought.

This is where cranial osteopathic skills come in. An osteopath skilled in this work is able to feel gently the distortion forced into the head and is able to encourage it back to a greater balance, to where it would like to be, so that growth can occur more evenly. This is why it is so important to see a baby as soon as possible after birth while the head is still soft and any distortion has not had a chance to set in. Days can make a difference.

Cranial osteopathy helps the little head rebalance itself naturally. Treatment is supported by the parents being vigilant with re-positioning and aids such as Lilla Kuddis soft pillow and remoulding orthoses.

So if your baby is unsettled, unhappy and not as content as you would like him or her to be, or appears to have distorted head there is something that can be done. If you are unsure telephone the osteopath and discuss your baby and your concerns.

Appointments:

Newborn infants up to 2 weeks old **free of charge**
Osteopathy & Neuro Development (HANDLE)
We also check mothers

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For information or to book an appointment, please contact us on: **01707 274 148**