

Preventing flat heads in babies

Back to sleep, front to play

Vary position to keep flat heads away



The safest way to put babies to sleep is on their backs. Babies who sleep on their backs are much less likely to die of sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS)—also known as “crib death.”

Because babies spend so much time on their backs, they are more likely to get flat spots on their heads.

Why do some babies develop flat spots on their heads?

Babies' skulls are very soft and the bones can be affected by pressure. Even the weight of the head against a mattress is a source of pressure on the skull bones.

Babies also have weak neck muscles. Because of this, they tend to turn their heads to one side when placed on their backs.

If your baby always turns their head to the same side, or spends a lot of time in an infant car seat or swing, one side of the baby's skull may become flat. This is known as a "flat head." The medical term for this is positional plagiocephaly.

A little bit of flattening of the skull will go away on its own. More serious flattening may stay. In rare cases, severe flattening may require surgery or the use of a special helmet to reshape the head. **None of these conditions will affect a baby's brain or development.**



How can I prevent my baby's head from flattening?

A simple way to prevent your baby from getting a flat head is to change the position of your baby's head often.

Babies like to have something interesting to look at while lying on their backs. Because of this, they tend to turn their heads to look out into their room rather than toward the wall. This way they can see you move about the room.



An easy way to change the position of your baby's head is to vary the way you place them in the crib. Place your baby's head at the head of the crib one day. The next day, place their head at the foot of the crib. Change back and forth with each new day.

Make sure that your baby is always looking out into the room—they will be happier with a good view. You might also put a mobile on the side of the crib facing the room to encourage your baby to look that way.

What else can I do to prevent my baby from getting a flat head?

Spend some supervised "tummy time" with your baby a few times each day when they are awake. It will give your baby a break from lying on their back and help prevent flat spots on their head.

Tummy time will also help strengthen your baby's upper body muscles. Babies who have daily tummy time tend to sit, crawl, and stand earlier than babies who do not.

Another way to give your baby a break from being on their back so much is to let them rest against your chest. A snuggly or baby sling is great for this. When your baby is resting in this position, allow them to face right one time and left the next.



What can I do if my baby doesn't like tummy time?

At first babies may not like being on their tummies because it limits what they can see and do. They must work hard to keep their heads up. It is also harder for them to move their arms and legs.

If your baby fusses or cries when placed on their tummy, pay attention. Try again later when your baby is calm and able to enjoy it more.

Make tummy time fun

- Give your baby toys to play with.
- Lie on your stomach and play with your baby.
- Place an unbreakable mirror near your baby so they can look down and see themselves.
- Play music or musical mobiles so baby will look to see where the music is coming from.
- Move your baby to a different room so they can explore and see new things.

It may help to start tummy time early and for short periods of time. You can start as soon as your baby's cord is off and the area is dry. You can start by laying your baby on your chest.

The more time babies spend on their tummies the stronger their muscles will become. As your baby's neck, arms, and leg muscles get stronger, they will find it easier and more enjoyable being on their tummy.



For more information

If you have concerns about your baby developing flat spots, talk to your family doctor or contact your local public health nurse. For the public health office nearest you, check your telephone book, visit our website (see below), or call one of the following **Public Health Services offices**:

Amherst	667-3319 or 1-800-767-3319
Antigonish	863-2743
Bridgewater	543-0850
Halifax Regional Municipality	481-5800
New Glasgow	752-5151
Sydney	563-2400
Truro	893-5820
Wolfville	542-6310
Yarmouth	742-7141

Parents can find more information at the Canadian Paediatric Society website at www.caringforkids.cps.ca.

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Public Health Services


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