

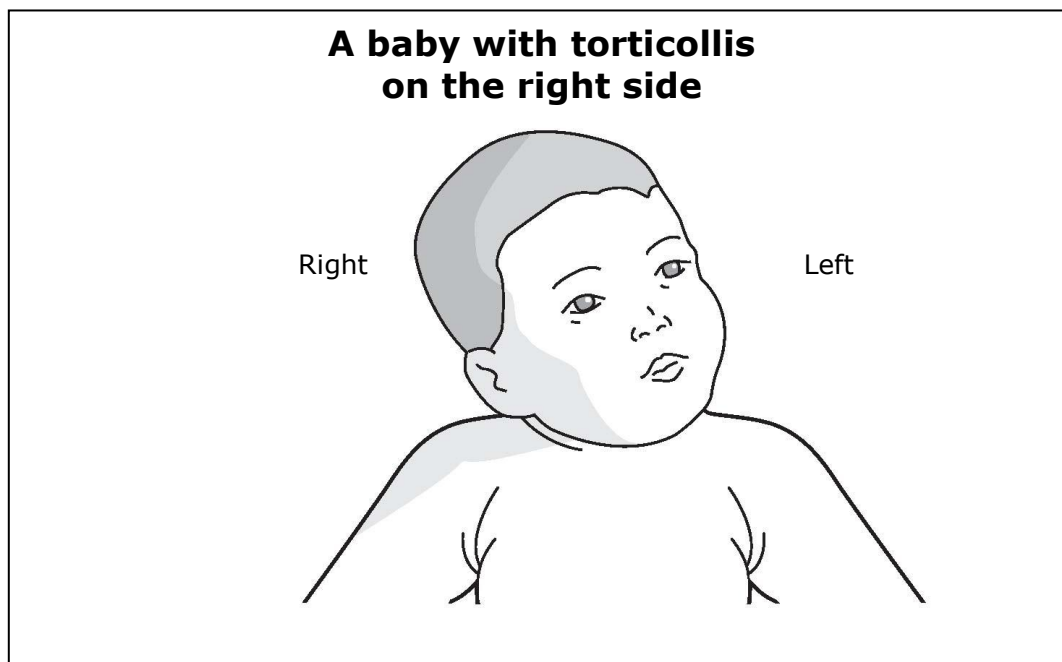
Congenital muscular torticollis

In this handout we call the baby “she” as this is simpler than writing “he or she” every time.

What is congenital muscular torticollis?

Torticollis is a condition in which a neck muscle (called the sternocleidomastoid muscle) is shorter on one side of the neck than the other. The word “congenital” means the condition was present at birth.

Torticollis causes your baby’s head to be pulled towards the short muscle and her chin to be turned away from that side. One side of your baby’s head and face may have a different shape than the other side.



What causes torticollis?

Although we do not know exactly what causes torticollis, there are two theories of how it can happen:

- The neck muscle was stretched during birth and healed with scar tissue. The scar tissue causes the muscles to become tight and short.
- The muscle is short because of the baby's position inside the womb.

You may feel a bump on your baby's neck. This is scar tissue which is a normal result of healing. It is not painful for your baby. With stretching exercises, the bump should go away in a few months.

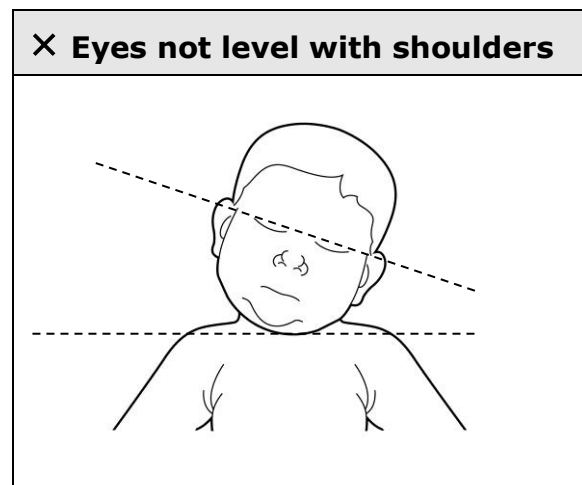
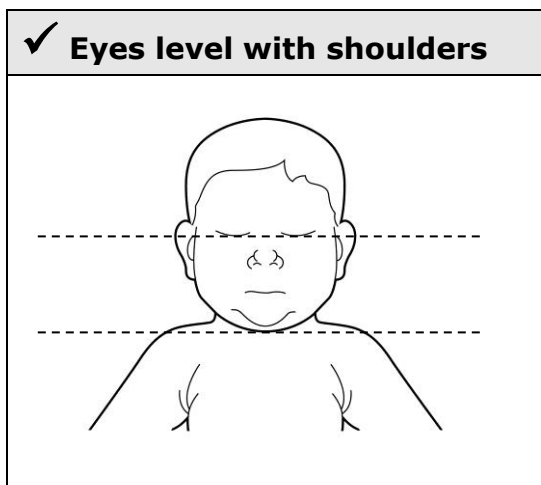
Why does my baby prefer to look in one direction?

The shortened neck muscle draws your baby's head towards it and turns her chin the other way. Because your baby's skull is soft, it can become flattened from constant pressure when your baby always looks in one direction. If her head becomes flat, she will continue to look in one direction and it will be hard for her to turn her head in the opposite direction.

Which positions are best for my baby?

With torticollis, your baby's head tilts or turns to one side.

Position your baby so that her head is straight. Check that her eyes are level with her shoulders.



Limit the amount of time your baby spends in a reclined position – in a car seat, bouncy baby seat or swing. When she is in this position, use rolled towels or foam to keep her head straight.

It is best that your baby does not use an exersaucer until she has good control of her head, neck and chest muscles.

Your baby needs to sleep on her back to prevent SIDS (Sudden Infant Death Syndrome).

What activities will help my baby?

You can do activities with your baby that:

- encourage her to hold her head in a variety of positions
- stretch and strengthen the muscles of her neck

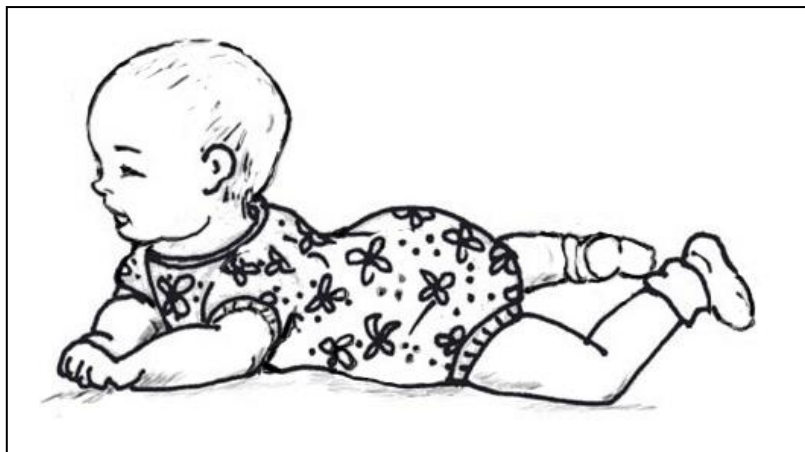
These activities will also prevent flattening of the head.

“Tummy time” and playing are important activities for your baby.

What is tummy time?

Your baby needs to spend time on her stomach every day, while she is awake and someone is watching her. This is called ‘tummy time’.

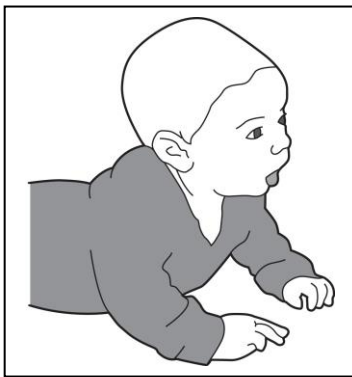
In this position, your baby learns to lift her head and push up with her arms to lift her chest.



Why is tummy time important?

Tummy time strengthens the muscles in your baby's neck, shoulders and back. These muscles are important for learning to move; from lifting her head to rolling and crawling.

Tummy time gives your baby a chance to explore and enjoy her surroundings in new ways. Without tummy time your baby's upper body movements may be delayed and the back of her head can become flat.



During tummy time, encourage your child to:

- raise her head and look straight ahead
- reach and look to the least preferred side

When should I start tummy time?

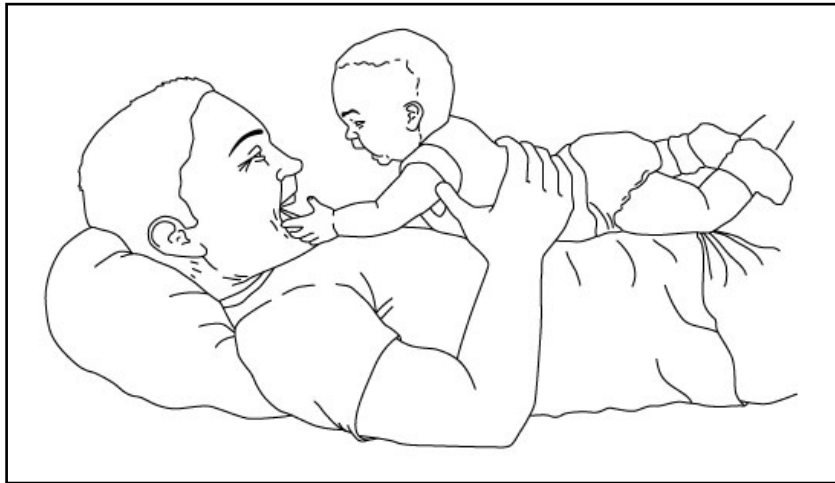
Tummy time can begin with a newborn baby. A newborn baby can lift her head briefly to look around. By 3 months of age, a baby's neck muscles are usually strong enough to hold up her head for a longer time.

Where should I put my baby for tummy time?

Tummy time can take place on any firm, flat surface covered by a non-fuzzy fabric, such as a crib, playpen or on the floor. Many babies enjoy being held slanted slightly upright, on their parent's chest or lap.

My baby screams when I put her down. How can I help her adjust?

Babies may not enjoy tummy time at first. When babies are placed on their stomach they have to work against gravity to move. This is hard work and some babies will protest. Comfort and soothe your baby, but keep providing tummy time.



You can lay her on your chest, facing you. She may enjoy looking at your face while you help her prop on her elbows.

Another position to help her get used to tummy time is to lay her across your lap.

Make it a fun time. Get down on the floor with her. Use toys or a mirror to encourage your baby to lift her head and play.

Build tummy time into her daily routine. Every time you put her down to diaper or dress her, place her on her tummy first for a moment. Then roll her over to change her diaper or clothes.

Gradually increase the amount of time your baby spends on her tummy.

What exercises should I do at home with my baby?

The physiotherapist will show you how to safely do exercises with your baby to improve her neck movements. Exercises will stretch the short muscle and strengthen the weak muscles.

Stretching should be done gently, slowly and steadily. When you feel resistance, don't push further.

Exercises can make your baby's muscles feel stretched or tired. This may upset her, but does not cause pain. If your baby fusses, pause the exercise and reassure her. When she is calm, you can continue the exercise.

During play, you can help your child stretch the short muscle and strengthen the weak muscles. Position your baby so that she has to turn her head to the least preferred side to enjoy:

- hearing your voice, music or interesting sounds
- reaching for a favorite toy
- seeing your pet

Do this often during the day.

How long will I have to do these exercises?

This will depend on several things such as your child's age and her progress. The physiotherapist will check your child's head and neck movements at each visit. When your child has gained enough movement and strength, the physiotherapist will tell you to stop doing the exercises.

If you have any questions about your child's condition or care, please speak with a member of the health care team.

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