

# Congenital Muscular Torticollis, Infant

Congenital muscular torticollis is a condition in which the neck muscle that goes from the bottom of the skull to the collarbone (*sternocleidomastoid muscle*) is shorter than normal, causing the head to tilt and the chin to rotate to one side. The condition is present at birth (*congenital*).



## What are the causes?

The cause of this condition is not known. This condition is often related to an injury to the sternocleidomastoid muscle or a deformity of this muscle. This muscle may be injured or deformed as a result of:

- An abnormal position of the head in the womb.
- A difficult birth that results in trauma.
- A birth in which the buttocks or feet come out first (*breech birth*).
- An abnormality of the spinal cord in the neck.

## What are the signs or symptoms?

Symptoms of this condition may not develop until the child is 1 month of age or older. Symptoms include:

- A lump in the sternocleidomastoid muscle.
- A head tilt toward the affected side, with the chin pointing to the other side. Most of the time, the tilt is to the right side of the child's body.
- Trouble moving the neck.
- Trouble moving the head up and down or side to side.
- A slightly flat face on one side.

## How is this diagnosed?

This condition is usually found during a routine checkup or a well-child visit. It may be diagnosed with a physical exam and imaging tests, such as an X-ray or an ultrasound scan.

## How is this treated?

This condition is usually first treated by helping your child stretch the sternocleidomastoid muscle. This will cause it to lengthen over time. The amount of time it takes to correct the condition varies. Children who begin treatment before they are 1 month old usually have a faster recovery time than those who are treated later.

Once diagnosed, you may need to take your child to a health care provider who has special training in muscle problems (*physical therapist*). The physical therapist will perform more detailed testing and then create a comprehensive exercise program for your child.

Your child's health care provider will:

- Explain what types of exercises stretch this muscle.
- Show you how you can help your child do these exercises.
- Tell you how often these exercises should be done.

If your child's congenital muscular torticollis is not treated and corrected during the infancy stage, this condition can lead to deformities and limitations in head and neck movement. If this occurs, more invasive procedures, such as injections (*botulinum neurotoxin*) or surgery may be needed.

### **Follow these instructions at home:**

#### **Activity**

- Help your child stretch as told by his or her health care provider. If you have any questions, contact the health care provider.
- Limit time in car seats and infant carriers.
- When your infant is awake, encourage play time on his or her belly ("tummy time") three or more times a day.
- Take steps to prevent your child from tilting his or her head toward the affected side only (*postural preference*). To help your child improve neck and head mobility:
  - Put toys where your child has to turn to see them. Toys that make sounds work best for getting your child's attention.
  - Change positions often when feeding your child.
  - Carry your child as shown by your health care provider. Position your child in a way that your child has to look away from the short side of his or her neck. This will stretch your child's sternocleidomastoid muscle.
  - Put your child in a crib so that he or she must turn his or her head to look out.

#### **General instructions**

- Have your child do exercises as told by his or her health care provider.
- Give over-the-counter and prescription medicines only as told by your child's health care provider.
- Keep all follow-up visits. This is important. Physical therapy reassessment is recommended 3–12 months after therapy has been stopped.

### **Contact a health care provider if:**

- Exercise at home is not helping.
- Your child is having trouble balancing, especially when sitting upright.
- Your child is having trouble feeding.

### **Summary**

- Congenital muscular torticollis is a condition in which the neck muscle that goes from the bottom of the skull to the collarbone (*sternocleidomastoid muscle*) is shorter than normal, causing the head to tilt to one side.
- The cause of this condition is not known.
- Children who begin treatment before they are 1 month old usually have a faster recovery time than those who are treated later.
- This condition is usually first treated by helping your child stretch the sternocleidomastoid muscle.
- Surgery may be needed if the condition is not relieved by physical therapy.

This information is not intended to replace advice given to you by your health care provider. Make sure you discuss any questions you have with your health care provider.

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