

Dr Jenny Gregor  
Neonatologist & Paediatrician  
Suite 3, Ground Floor  
271 Clayton Rd  
CLAYTON VIC 3168  
Ph: 1300 657 257  
Fax: 03 8526 0302  
[www.carepaediatrics.com.au](http://www.carepaediatrics.com.au)



## **Abnormal head shape**

Plagiocephaly or abnormal head shape is an extremely common condition with infants. This usually means that the baby's head shape is flattened at the back either one side or both sides. Plagiocephaly does not affect the growth of the baby's brain or their development but can result in uneven growth of your infants face and head.

**Causes:** The unusual head shape can result from moulding in pregnancy, as there is usually quite a tight fit in the womb particularly in the later stages of pregnancy. The bones that make up your baby's head are very soft to allow passage through the birth canal and later to allow growth to an adult sized head. Most babies spend a lot of their time in the first few months lying flat on their backs and this can result in flattening of the back of the head. This condition is known as *deformational plagiocephaly*.

**Prevention:** A baby's head position needs to be varied during sleep and awake periods. There are some simple things you can do to help prevent your baby developing plagiocephaly:

- 1) Sleep time: A baby must always be placed on their back to sleep to reduce the risk of SIDS (Sudden Infant Death Syndrome/Cot Death). Place your baby at alternate ends of the cot to sleep, or change the position of the cot in the room. This will encourage babies to look at different angles.
- 2) Play time: Place your baby on their tummy to play when awake. Tummy time is extremely important for developmental as babies develop from the head to the feet. Initially your baby may not enjoy tummy time but as their neck muscles become stronger they will push up with their hands and enjoy their tummy time. This is what a baby needs to do in order to roll which is one of their important developmental stages. You can also change the position of toys that your baby likes to look at. You can also under supervision place an object near the babies preferred side to look at to discourage them to not look this way
- 3) Holding baby: Vary the holding and carrying positions of your baby. For example, use a sling, hold upright for cuddles, carry your baby over your arm on their tummy or side.

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**Treatment:** Many children with plagiocephaly do not need any intensive treatment, however in addition to the above measures your infant may need to see a physiotherapist for some special exercises to further improve their head shape. For children where treatment is necessary, it is important to see a specialist (plastic surgeon) between four and eight months of age. This is because the greatest amount of correction will occur before 12 months of age. Treatment is provided by a team including a plastic surgeon, orthotist and paediatric physiotherapist. Sometimes when the uneven head shape is more severe a *cranial remodeling helmet* may assist. The helmet helps the skull re-shaping process by removing the pressure over the flat area.