

BABIES · 5 MIN READ

Flat head shape (plagiocephaly) and helmets: what actually helps

Why flat spots develop, what repositioning and physiotherapy can do, and an honest look at helmet therapy.



● Why flat spots happen

A baby's skull is soft and still forming, which is exactly what lets it pass safely through birth and grow around a developing brain. That same softness means that if a baby spends a lot of time with their head resting on one spot, whether from a side preference, a sleeping position, or simply from being on their back a lot (as safe sleep guidance rightly advises), that spot can gradually flatten. This is plagiocephaly when the flattening is on one side, or brachycephaly when it's across the whole back of the head.

It's extremely common, thought to affect a substantial minority of babies to some degree by a few months old, and it is a shape issue, not a brain issue. It doesn't affect how the brain grows or develops underneath.

● The link with torticollis

Flat head shape very often travels with a neck preference, or torticollis: tightness in a neck muscle that makes turning one way easier than the other. The two usually feed each other, the preference causes the resting position, and the flat spot then makes that position more comfortable, so the preference continues. Because of this, addressing the neck is usually central to helping the head shape, not a separate issue.

● What helps at home

Plenty of supervised awake tummy time from birth, little and often. Varying position during the day: carrying, feeding and playing on both sides, and changing which end of the cot your baby's head goes so the interesting view in the room is always on the flatter side. Encouraging your baby to turn toward their less-favoured side with toys, your face, or a window.

None of this changes safe sleep advice: babies should still always be put down to sleep on their back, on a firm, flat surface, with nothing in the cot. Repositioning strategies are about awake time, not sleep position.

● What physiotherapy adds

Physiotherapy assesses and treats any neck tightness directly, with gentle stretches and handling advice tailored to your baby, and gives you a realistic, specific repositioning plan rather than general advice. Starting early, ideally as soon as a preference or flattening is noticed, tends to mean less to do later, since a young baby's skull reshapes more readily than an older one's.

● Helmet therapy: an honest look

Cranial remoulding helmets are a specialist orthotic treatment, fitted and monitored by an orthotist rather than by a physiotherapist, usually considered for moderate to severe head shape differences that haven't responded to repositioning and physiotherapy by around four to six months, when there is still enough growth left to make a meaningful difference. They are not offered, fitted or sold by this practice.

The evidence on how much helmets add over repositioning and physiotherapy alone is genuinely mixed, and reasonable clinicians differ on when to recommend one. If your child's flattening is more than mild, or isn't improving with the approaches above, we'll say so honestly and can help you think through whether an orthotist referral for an assessment is worth exploring, alongside continuing physiotherapy for any neck component.

● When to seek help

Speak to your health visitor, GP or book an assessment with us if your baby has a noticeable head-turn preference, if a flat spot is present or seems to be getting worse, or if you're simply unsure.

Earlier is easier for babies, and we're always glad to reassure you when things look typical, or to point you toward an orthotist assessment when that's genuinely the right next step.

This guide is general information written by a paediatric physiotherapist, not medical advice about your child. If you are worried, trust your instinct: speak to your GP or health visitor, or get in touch with us.



Written by Lucy Jolliffe BSc MSc, HCPC registered physiotherapist (PH142090), Little Movers Physiotherapy. Clinics in North Walsham and Aylsham, plus home, school and nursery visits across North Norfolk.

Call or WhatsApp **07842 898949** · info@littlemoversphysio.co.uk · littlemoversphysio.co.uk

Families can book directly, no GP referral needed. Professionals can refer at

littlemoversphysio.co.uk/refer. Read this guide online at littlemoversphysio.co.uk/guides/plagiocephaly-and-helmets.