

Torticollis in Babies

Definition

- Torticollis is when a baby's head is tilted to one side.
- Tight neck muscles on that side most often cause torticollis.
- About 3% of babies are born with torticollis.
- This medical diagnosis was made by a doctor after seeing your baby.

Health Information

Symptoms

- **Tilted appearance.** Baby's head is tilted. They look to one side rather than straight ahead. The head and ear tilts toward the shoulder on the side with the tight muscle. The chin points to the normal side.
- **Tight neck.** Neck muscles are tight or stiff on one side. Normally, the neck allows the head to rotate and bend equally to the right and left. In torticollis, these movements are limited. This may make it hard for baby to feed at one breast.
- **Neck lump.** The muscle on one side of the neck may have a small lump or "knot."
- **Uneven face.** The cheeks, forehead, or ears may look different between sides. This mainly happens if the torticollis goes untreated.
- Torticollis is often not noticed until 2 to 4 weeks after birth. Reason: this is when babies normally start to move their heads.
- Torticollis is not painful.

Side Effect

- **Head shape.** Most babies will develop a flat spot on one side of the head. Reason: torticollis makes them lie on one side of the head too much. This is called "positional plagiocephaly." For details, see the Plagiocephaly (Positional) in Babies handout.

Causes

- Torticollis (twisted neck) can start in the womb or during birth.
- **Womb position.** Baby's head may get tilted to one side in the womb.
- **Abnormal muscle development.** Neck muscles may not develop properly in the womb.
- **Muscle injury.** During the birth process, neck muscles on one side may get bruised or strained. Bleeding into the neck muscle can cause a lump. The lump often doesn't appear for a few weeks. More common with a breech delivery.

Medical Diagnosis: How It's Made

- Your doctor can diagnose torticollis with a physical exam.
- Sometimes an X-ray of the bones in the neck may be needed.

Care Advice

1. Key Points

- Some babies are born with tight neck muscles on one side.
- Torticollis gets better with gentle stretches and position changes.
- Here's some home care advice that should help.

2. Do Gentle Neck Stretching Exercises Daily

- Only do neck exercises if you have been taught how to do them.
- To correct torticollis, two different stretches will help. One stretch helps turn baby's head (rotation). The other helps stretch the tight side of baby's neck (side bending).
- To do these, put your baby on their back on a safe, flat surface.
- **Rotation stretch.** Place your hand on baby's shoulder opposite the tight side. Gently turn your baby's head toward the tight side.
- **Side bending stretch.** Place your hand on baby's shoulder on the tight side. Use your other hand to gently stretch the ear away from the shoulder on the tight side.
- Stretch only until you feel mild resistance from the tight muscles. Don't force the stretch. Hold the stretch for 10 seconds, then let it release. Repeat a few times.
- Stretching should never cause pain or crying. If it does, do a lesser stretch.
- Do these stretching exercises at least 3 times each day. A good time is after diaper changes when baby is already on their back.
- **Stretching video.** Use this video to better understand how to do these stretches.
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4yHt_JMLfbk

3. Use Certain Positions to Stretch Tight Neck Muscles

- Certain positions can help baby stretch the tight side naturally.
- **Eating position.** Give the bottle or breast in a way that helps baby stretch the tight side.
- **Sleeping position.** Lie baby on their back. Position them so they must stretch the tight side to see the room. This may mean putting them in their crib the opposite direction from what you have been doing.
- **Active positions.** When awake, help them look to the side that stretches the tight muscle. Use toys, your face or your voice to attract their attention.
- Don't use pillows, towels or toys to position your baby during sleep. Safe sleep is on a flat firm surface with baby on their back. For details, see the Safe Sleep to Prevent SIDS handout.

4. Do Tummy Time Daily

- Tummy time is a brief period when a baby lies on their belly.
- Tummy time should only occur with adult supervision while baby is awake.
- Tummy time should be done on a flat safe surface.
- Start 3 times each day. Gradually work up to as much as 10 times each day.
- Encourage baby to lift their head. Get their attention with toys, your face, or your voice.
- For details, see the Tummy Time handout.

5. What To Expect

- Torticollis should get better with stretching and position changes.
- You should see improvement in a few months. It can take 6 months for torticollis to go away completely.
- Torticollis goes away sooner if neck stretching exercises start earlier.
- Some babies may need treatment from a physical therapist. Your doctor can help decide.

Call Your Doctor If

- You want to be taught correct neck stretching exercises.
- Tight neck muscle is not getting better after a month of stretching
- You think your baby needs to be seen
- You have other questions or concerns

Pediatric Care Advice

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