

# Congenital muscular torticollis

**This leaflet is for the parents/carer of babies who have congenital muscular torticollis, also known as infant torticollis. It gives general information and advice on what torticollis is and describes stretches to carry out with your child. Your physiotherapist will also give you the APCP leaflet 'Head turning preference and plagiocephaly'.**

## What is torticollis?

Torticollis means 'twisted neck' in Latin. It is the shortening of the sternocleidomastoid muscle, causing the chin to turn towards the opposite side and the head to tilt towards the affected muscle. It is relatively common and can be present at birth or take up to three months to develop.

Torticollis can be caused by a sternocleidomastoid tumour, which is a benign swelling that gradually subsides, and can shorten the muscle. It occurs on one side of the neck. If the tumour persists it may be checked with an ultrasound scan.

Torticollis can also be associated with plagiocephaly, a flattening of the head on the side that the baby finds it easier to lie on.

In some cases it is not clear why a baby has torticollis, but contributory factors could be:

- Positional – more common in breech babies.
- Forceps delivery.
- Trauma.
- Repetitive patterns (i.e. attention drawn to one side continuously due to favourite toy in pram).

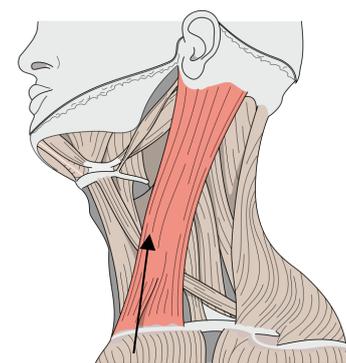
Most babies don't feel any pain as a result of torticollis. With treatment, the muscle will grow and stretch, but without intervention it may cause permanent limitation of the baby's neck movement and require surgery when they are older.

## Signs and symptoms

- Preferential head turn - mostly look one way, may have difficulty holding head in midline.
- Difficulty turning their head to breast feed.
- A swelling in the side of the baby's neck.

## Treatment

With treatment most babies will regain full range of movement of their necks. Your baby's movement will be monitored by your physiotherapist and if there has been no improvement in three months, they can be referred to the Orthopaedic Department for assessment. Please refer to the APCP leaflet 'Head turning preference and plagiocephaly' for general advice on positioning. Your physiotherapist can provide you with this or you can find it on online (see helpful links).



*Sternocleidomastoid muscle*

Torticollis can occur on the left or the right hand side of the neck. The following pictures and descriptions are for an infant with a right sided torticollis and a preferential head turn to the left. If your child has a left torticollis, please reverse the description.

## Carrying your child

With your child facing away from you, in a side lying position, have your child's RIGHT ear resting against your RIGHT forearm.

Get your forearm or hand between the child's ear and shoulder to help stretch the tight muscles in their neck. You can use your forearm to lift your baby's head away from the shoulder to get a side bending stretch. Place your LEFT arm between your baby's legs and support your baby's body and grasp his LEFT shoulder with your LEFT hand.



## Side stretch

The best place to do this exercise is on the floor or on a changing mat. Place your baby on their back.

Hold your baby's RIGHT shoulder down with your LEFT hand.

Use your RIGHT hand cupped over the top of their head. Slowly bend their LEFT ear towards their LEFT shoulder.

Hold for 10 seconds. Repeat \_\_\_ times.

Do this exercise \_\_\_ times a day.



## Rotation (head turning)

Place your LEFT hand on your babies LEFT shoulder. Place your RIGHT hand on the side of your baby's face.

Slowly turn your baby's head to look over their RIGHT shoulder.

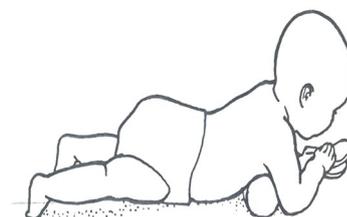
Hold this position for \_10\_ seconds. Repeat \_2\_ times.

Do this exercise \_5\_ times a day.



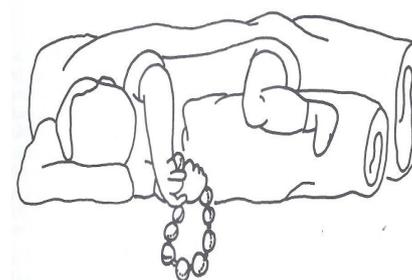
## Positions for play

Playing on their stomach (tummy time) is important for when your child is awake. It helps them to learn head control and strengthen their back and neck muscles. Encourage your baby to look to the side that they find difficult to look to while they play on their tummy.



## Side lying play

Side lying is also important for your baby's development to encourage hand to hand play which is important for feeding, and hand eye co-ordination. It will also allow gravity to give your baby a gentle neck stretch.



## Useful links

<http://apcp.csp.org.uk/documents/parent-leaflet-head-turning-preference-plagiocephaly-2011>

## Useful contacts

Physiotherapy Department  
Dingley Specialist Children's Centre  
University of Reading, Earley Gate  
Reading RG6 6BZ  
Tel: 0118 322 5248

## References

1. Physio tools, version 3.066, 12<sup>th</sup> November 2003 silver level  
<http://medical-dictionary.thefreedictionary.com/torticollis>

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**Please ask if you need this information in another language or format.**

Physiotherapy Department, Paediatrics, Helen Forbes, August 2016, Lee Bailey, July 2020  
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