

Osteopathy for Babies with a Flat Spot

How osteopathic treatment can improve the shape of babies heads.

The campaign against cot death has been a successful one. Cot deaths have dropped by 80% and families are now able to go "back to sleep" with less fear of the unimaginable occurring. There has been one very noticeable side effect however - a dramatic increase in babies with flat spots or misshapen heads from sleeping on the same part of the head all night.

The increase has been so dramatic that there have been mothers groups talking about it, child health nurses noticing the trend, and articles and web forums generating discussion. A recent article quoted a '700% increase in babies with the condition in the past eight years at the Sydney Children's Hospital Helmet Clinic'. Parents are understandably worried about this becoming a teasing point at school and whether or not it will cause any other problems. Clearly this is a problem facing many new parents, but what treatment options are available?

A common treatment approach is a fibreglass helmet, worn 20-23 hours a day, for many months. An alternative to the helmet is a gentle form of osteopathic treatment called Osteopathy in the Cranial Field.

Osteopathy is focussed on improving the balance of the body so the musculo-skeletal, nervous and circulatory systems all function in harmony with each other. Balancing the body enables the body's natural self healing mechanism - known as homeostasis - to function more efficiently. The treatment involves the osteopath using very gentle pressure to balance different strains in the body. There are no quick or forceful movements, instead the osteopath places their hands under the head, chest or pelvis. This feels like the hands are cradling the body, so the treatment does not cause the child any pain and is completely safe for their soft body.

An example of treatment of this condition can be seen in William. At birth William's head was quite flattened at the back. Sleeping on his back had exaggerated this to the point where the flat spot covered the

whole back of his head. By this stage William's flat spot was so obvious that even at a casual glance you could see it. This physical anomaly had caused his ears to be misshapen, folded instead of straight, with the top of each one nearly touching the bottom. His jaw was also protruding, he had difficulty breathing through his nose and was unable to turn his head to the left very well. William's mother was naturally concerned that he would suffer from teasing at school, but also that he would have difficulty with sinus infections and pain from his neck.

I treated William once a week for four weeks then once a month for a further four months. During the first month William was able to move his head more easily to both sides and his ears had returned to a near normal position. By the end of the treatment his condition had improved so much that there was only minor restriction in his upper neck and his head was a normal shape.

Baby's heads grow incredibly quickly. At birth the joints in the head, more correctly known as sutures, are very pliable and soft, some of them can be felt as the fontanelles or soft spots on the babies head. If one of these sutures is restricted in some way then growth will not occur as quickly in this area and the rest of the head must compensate. To make a comparison, if you think of a balloon which has been squeezed from the bottom, the top of the balloon will stretch to accommodate for this, creating a different shape.

If you look at the babies with misshapen heads in a play group it is quite easy to see that each child is different. Some babies have flat spots in the centre of the head, some to the left or right, some lower or higher, some bigger or smaller, some may have lumps and these can sometimes protrude like "horns" on each side at the top of the head. These differences occur because each child is adapting to different strains.

There are many causes of these strains including; fibroids on the mother's uterus,

little movement of the foetus during the pregnancy, a small amount of amniotic fluid, the waters breaking well before the birth of the child, the foetus engaging well before the birth, a vacuum or forceps extraction or a long birth. These different forces mould the head into a different shape and after the birth actions like crying and feeding help in the remoulding of the head by increasing pressure inside the head. It is when this process doesn't occur fully that restrictions remain in the head. These restrictions may cause irritation to important nerves and blood vessels in the head. For this reason, common childhood problems such as reflux, colic and irritability can often be traced back to the birth process.

Another example of treatment can be seen in Jamie. Jamie's birth didn't progress well so he was delivered by an emergency caesarean section. Due to prolonged labour, Jamie's head had developed a large fluid lump which can be seen in the picture below. At four weeks of age the lump had only changed shape slightly and actually increased a little when he slept on it. Doctors had told his parents that his lump might never go away, instead calcifying over time. Naturally his parents were quite concerned. After his first osteopathic treatment this led to a 50% decrease in the size of his lump. After the second treatment the lump had gone completely. One more treatment was given for maintenance. The picture below shows the dramatic change in Jamie's head, the left being before, and the two on the right show after treatment.

Apart from professional treatment there is much to be said for parental intervention. The feeding position and play positions can affect these strains, so ensuring adequate "tummy time" occurs during the day is also important. The sleeping position can also be monitored. When parents make an effort to place their child with the head lying alternatively to the left, right and centred, some problems can be avoided or alleviated.

These two case studies show the normal range in treatment times for children. If parents are in any way concerned about the shape of their child's head, osteopathy may provide a natural stress free solution, which is similar or less in price than traditional helmet therapy.

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www.brisbaneosteopathic.com.au.

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