What is torticollis?

Torticollis is a condition where tight neck muscles cause a child to hold his head tilted and/or turned to one side instead of in the middle. One reason babies do this may have been their position inside the mother’s womb. Babies have limited space while in the womb, and the head may stay in a certain position. This results in one or more muscles developing at a different rate than surrounding muscles. There is nothing a mother can do to change the baby’s position while in the womb. Torticollis may also be caused by how the baby is positioned at home. When an infant is in a car seat or bouncy seat for a long time his head may fall to one side. If his head remains tilted, the neck muscles will become tight and his head may become misshapen. In rare cases, torticollis can result from injury or infection to the neck muscles, bony abnormalities or tumors.

How is torticollis diagnosed?

Torticollis is diagnosed by your child's healthcare provider. The healthcare provider may move your baby's head from side to side, feel the muscles in his neck, and observe your baby while lying down or in your lap. In some cases, doctors use a CAT scan or X-ray to diagnose torticollis.

Feel free to contact Pediatric Therapy Services at Blank Children’s Hospital at the following address or phone number:

**Pediatric Therapy Services**

1200 Pleasant Street
Des Moines, IA 50309
(515) 241-8550

2701 SE Convenience Blvd; Suite 8
Ankeny, IA 50021
(515) 963-7924
Treatment of torticollis

It is important to select a pediatric physical therapist who works with children on a regular basis and understands their developmental needs.

Treatment consists of using stretching exercises to lengthen the tight muscles in your baby's neck. Other exercises include rolling and ways to carry or move your baby so he has to use the correct muscles to hold up his head. A pediatric physical therapist will also show you ways to position your baby so he must turn his head to see an object, which will strengthen his muscles. Tummy time is very important, and we encourage you to place your baby on his tummy several times throughout the day to play. But remember, always place your baby on his back to sleep.

Expect your baby to cry during stretching activities. You are not hurting your baby, but most likely making him uncomfortable. Babies do not like being uncomfortable or having to work hard. They also do not like being held in one position or restrained. If your baby appears to have difficulty breathing, is unable to cry or turns blue during exercises, stop and contact your healthcare provider or 911 immediately.

The length of treatment depends on the muscle tightness, how much the baby moves on his own and his age. Treatment length will also depend on the amount of time you spend working with your baby at home. Your child will be finished with therapy when the therapist and you agree the child is keeping his head in the middle and progressing through age appropriate skills normally.

Why is treating torticollis so important?

Early treatment is recommended for any baby suspected of having torticollis. If left untreated, a baby is at risk for learning to move with his head tilted. This causes a child to use one side of his body more than the opposite side. Torticollis can also cause a baby’s head to flatten on one side, and if left untreated, a curve in the baby's spine may develop as he grows older.

The younger your baby is, the easier treatment will be for both you and baby. As a child grows older, it becomes more difficult to correct the muscle tightness through stretching and strengthening alone. A child may require special medicines or surgical intervention. Once the muscle tightness has been treated, a child is still at a slight risk for redeveloping torticollis during growth spurts because the muscle and surrounding tissue doesn't always grow at the same rate. In addition, the tightness often appears to get worse during teething and illnesses.

If you have any questions, do not hesitate to contact your healthcare provider or a pediatric physical therapist.