

Back To Sleep, Tummy to Play

Author: Gena Livingston PT

Since the American Academy of Pediatrics recommended that babies be put “back to sleep” ten years ago, the incidence of sudden infant death syndrome or “SIDS” has dropped by 50 %, but because infants are spending more time on their backs, they are developing flat spots on the back of their skull, a condition called positional plagiocephaly. The increased time infants are spending on their backs is also causing a later attainment of motor milestones. Lying on the back can delay motor skills because the infant does not get the chance to build the necessary upper body strength it requires to perform more advanced skills. Lack of tummy time can not only influence how long it takes for your infant to master basic skills like lifting its head and rolling over, but also may impact sitting up and crawling.

Back to sleep should not be discouraged, as studies have shown the effectiveness of this strategy in preventing SIDS, but don't forget tummy time should be encouraged as well . The solution is to flip your infant over on its belly during time when he is awake and supervised. This will not only help in preventing a flat head, but will enable the infant to use his upper body muscles to reach and pivot. Tummy time promotes trunk strength, head control and lower extremity coordination all of which are prerequisites to sitting up, crawling and eventually walking. Start by placing the infant on a blanket and giving it several five to ten minute sessions a day. It may take your infant time to gradually build up the strength in the neck and trunk to tolerate this activity. If the infant becomes fussy do not force him to stay, but give him a break, change the environment

(new toy, mirror) and change the position. (place infant on your chest while he does tummy time)

If you feel your infant is not lifting his head appropriately, reaching out to play with toys or crying each time he is placed on his tummy, a consultation with a pediatric physical therapist may be warranted. Through exercises, developmental positions and strategies for the parents, a pediatric physical therapist can assist the infant in strengthening the muscles required for performing age appropriate motor skills. When a child develops weakness of head and trunk musculature, this can lead to motor delays into early childhood and adolescence. Early intervention is always key in order to prevent unneeded impairments later on in your child's life.

If your child is diagnosed with plagiocephaly, a pediatric physical therapist should be consulted to recommend repositioning strategies. The therapist can also help to determine the root cause of the plagiocephaly. The infant may have an underlying tight neck muscle. (tightness of the sternocleidomastoid muscle called torticollis) This can cause the infant to rotate and tilt its head in one direction leading to a constant pressure on the same region of the skull. This constant pressure causes a flat spot on the skull and may cause ear misalignment and facial asymmetry. The good news is with repositioning strategies, stretching and strengthening of the muscles, the skull is moldable up to a certain age and should reshape if treated and diagnosed appropriately.