

# One Often Missed Medical Problem in Infants

**Your baby can't tell you what's wrong. So when something seems not quite right, it's up to you to play detective**

Ailing babies can't tell you where it hurts, when it started, what would make them feel better, or what makes them feel worse. In short, a sick baby is a blank slate for diagnosis. And getting the diagnosis wrong — missing a possibly serious condition, or treating it improperly — is potentially more dangerous for little patients than it is for older kids.

Below is one commonly missed, medical condition that affects children under age 1, and how to make sure you and your doctor get the diagnosis right.

## **TORTICOLLIS**

I was a very ugly baby. "Bald, bumps, and a misshapen head," my mom often says, shaking her head over old photo albums. The baldness and the bumps went away; the slightly misshapen head (now hidden by hair, thank goodness) remains. Turns out I had torticollis, a shortening of the neck muscle that causes a baby's head to tilt. Like many babies who have this trait, I slept in one position to accommodate my stiff neck, so my head grew slightly flat on one side — a condition known as plagiocephaly.

Torticollis can be present at birth, or it can gradually develop if a baby consistently sleeps in the same position with her head lolling to one side. In fact, the number of cases has risen since 1992, when the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) began its lifesaving campaign to prevent Sudden Infant Death Syndrome by having babies sleep on their backs. Eventually, the neck muscles shorten and the baby develops a distinctive head tilt; parents and doctors may not notice until the tilt (or the plagiocephaly that often results) is dramatic.

When Jennifer Wolff's daughter, Zöe, was born, Wolff, a writer in New York City, knew right away that "something was wrong with her neck," she says; however, the pediatrician at the hospital assured her that "babies take a while to straighten out." But by her 6-week checkup, Zöe's symptoms were unmistakable. "Her head tilted down and to the right, her chin tilted up and to the left, and the left side of her face was bigger and more developed," Wolff says. "One of her eyes was even closed."

Zöe's torticollis, though severe, was noticed early and corrected successfully with physical and occupational therapy — but even a mild case (like mine) can cause serious problems if not addressed. Plagiocephaly, if extreme, may require a helmet to correct the head shape. Left untreated, torticollis can worsen; eventually, surgery may be required. "Vision problems, jaw malformation, facial asymmetries that can lead to speech and feeding issues, and difficulties with gross and fine motor sensory development can all result if it isn't treated," says Lucia Boletti, O.T.R., occupational therapist and supervisor of pediatric rehabilitation at New York-Presbyterian/Weill Cornell Hospital.

She advises parents who suspect that their baby has the condition to be aggressive and persistent with their child's doctor. She says, "It's important for parents to realize that torticollis doesn't 'fix' itself."