Abnormal head shape in babies

What is the cause?
In most cases it is due to the way young babies lie down. Babies’ heads are soft. Also babies are weak in the first 4 months after birth. They do not move their heads about much. They can start to lie with their head to one side. The soft head soon gets a bit flat on that side. Then it is easier for baby to lie with their head on that side. They will lie that way when asleep. Because of this the head gets flatter over a few weeks. The whole head can seem a little out of shape. Other causes of an abnormal head shape are rare. One is that the skull bones fuse too early.

Why do babies start to lie with their head to one side?
Some babies are born with their head a bit flat on one side. This can be due to how things were inside mother before birth. Or how they were born. It is easier for them to lie with their head on the flat side. Then it slowly gets flatter. Sometimes a baby is born with a short neck muscle on one side. This can make baby lie with their head to one side. In this case a lump may be seen in the muscle. It may be due to the muscle being a bit squashed or stretched during birth. The neck muscle gets better in a few weeks. Whatever the reason, when a baby starts to lie with their head to one side it slowly gets flatter on that side. Other causes are rare.

Does it get better?
After about 4 months the head shape often gets slowly better. This is because older babies are stronger. They move their heads about more. It is often much better when they are a year old. But all children’s heads are a bit different. They are never perfectly round. In most cases the head shape looks normal when they are at school.

Does it cause any harm?
In almost all cases an abnormal head shape does not cause any harm. The brain grows well. Learning is not affected. It doesn't effect a child’s ability when they grow up.
What needs to be done?
A doctor sees your baby. Sometimes they will be seen again. This is to check the head growth. Often nothing else needs to be done. Rarely an x-ray or CT scan is done. This is to check that the skull bones have not fused too early. You do not need to put baby down in any special way. It is best to give them plenty to look at. This will help them move their head about. A bit of time on their tummy when they are awake may be good for them.

What happens if the skull bones fuse too early?
In normal babies the skull bones fuse and the head becomes hard by about 2 years old. Very rarely the bones fuse too early. Then the head shape can look odd. It may be more than just flat on one side. Ridges may be felt over the joins between the bones. The head shape gets worse after 4 months instead of better. Your doctor will ask a doctor in Birmingham to see your baby. Sometimes an operation is needed to make the head shape better.

Where can I find more help and information?
King’s Mill Hospital
Patient Advice and liaison Services (PALS) on 01623 672222

Newark Hospital
Patient Advice and Liaison Services (PALS) on 01636 685692

If you need this information in a different language or format, please contact the Communications & Engagement Department on (01623) 672294 or email: patient.information@sfh-tr.nhs.uk