## Back is best

Research is clear that on the back is the best way for babies to sleep. It is twice as safe as the side and six times safer than the front.

Flat heads are **not** caused by sleeping on the back. They are caused by pressure on a soft skull. Babies need to sleep on the back, but vary their head position to avoid a flat head.

Sleeping on the back is one of the best ways to protect a baby from sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS or cot death).

The windpipe (trachea) is above the gullet (oesophagus) when a baby lies face-up. In this position it is easier for babies to keep their airways safe.
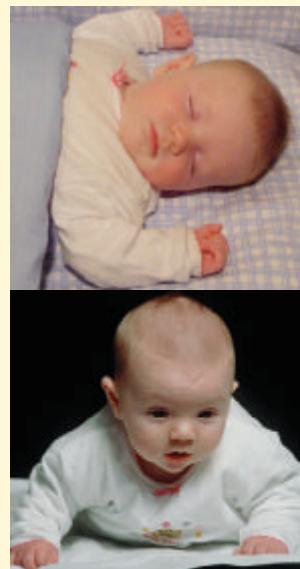
Back for sleep

Front for play

Upright for cuddles and hugs

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National Office, PO Box 13 864,
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Tel: (03) 379 9947
HYPERLINK http://www.efc.co.nz

To order copies

Contact your local public health service and quote the code number.

Also available

Other 'Protecting babies' leaflets on
Safe bed sharing (Code 1226)
Sudden infant death syndrome (Code 1228)
Changing smoking in pregnancy (Code 1231)

Thank you

Mr David Glasson
Plastic Surgeon, Wellington
for expert advice.

Olivia, Tanya and Kazan
for their beautiful photographs.

Important support

If you have questions or concerns about your baby's safety, talk to someone you trust.

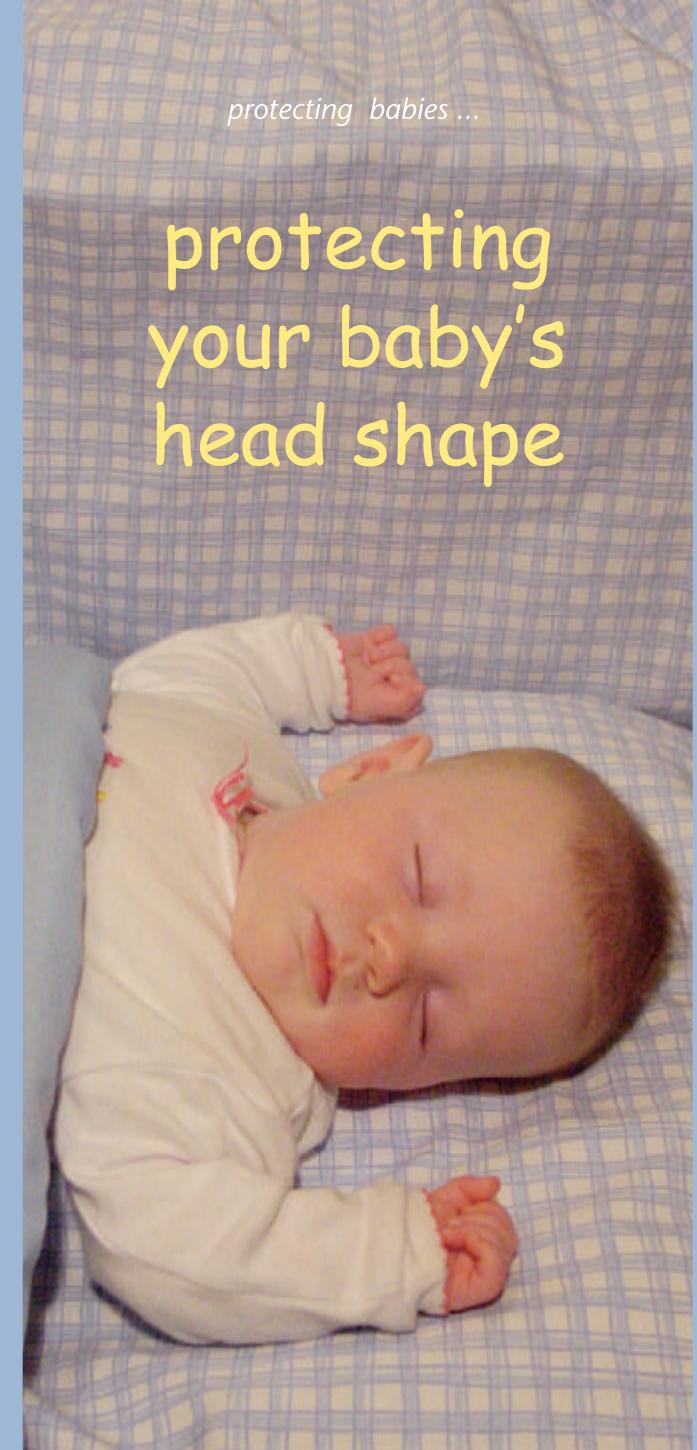This national service may help, too:

Healthline 0800 661 116

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protecting babies …

protecting your baby's head shape

Information on preventing flat heads in babies

The problem

Some babies develop different shaped heads from too much time spent lying on one part of the head. This is called "positional head-flattening".

How it can happen

The bones of a baby's skull are quite thin and soft. Pressure on them, from lying on the same spot, can make the head change shape.

How it develops

The problem develops when babies prefer a certain head position. They may be born with a slight flat spot due to moulding during delivery. This can make the head rest more easily on that spot. Or, they may have a favourite head position and so a flat area develops from habit.

Prevention is easy

Although there is no evidence that head flattening causes harm, most parents would like to prevent it. Starting from birth, babies need to vary the position in which their heads rest for sleep. They may need your help at first until they can change head positions on their own.

Older babies

As babies get older the problem goes. When they can move about, sit up and change position, they take care of it themselves.

Three ways to help your baby

1 When your baby sleeps, gently turn their head to vary where it rests.
A regular habit of this is probably the best way to help your baby. This rhyme may help.

"In the night, towards the right,
in the day, the other way."

2 Change where you put the things your baby likes to look at.
Your baby may face towards interesting things in the room. By changing these from side to side, or by turning the cot round, your baby may also change head positions.

3 Give your baby "tummy time", but only when awake.
The pressure on the heavy head is spread differently when babies lie on the tummy, sit up, or are held. Be sure your baby does not fall asleep while having "tummy time".

When flat spots do develop

A baby's head needs to be checked at birth. If a flat spot already exists treatment needs to start immediately. The treatment is the same as for prevention. Gently turn your baby's head to avoid pressure on the problem spot.

If head shape does change

If there has been no prevention, or no treatment in the early stages, the head may change shape. Parents usually notice this when their baby is 2 to 3 months old. Your doctor may refer your baby to a paediatrician.

Summary

Education is the best way to prevent flat heads in babies. Parents who know about the problem, and take steps to prevent it, can avoid it for their baby.

"tummy time"