

Theraplay, Inc.

Congenital Muscular Torticollis: Does My Child Have It?

Torticollis, or wryneck, is a condition when the neck muscles are tight and/or weak, and the head/neck tilts to one direction and looks towards the opposite direction. The primary muscle involved is called the sternocleidomastoid muscle. The most common type of torticollis in children is called Congenital Muscular Torticollis (CMT). The muscle tightness in CMT is likely caused by damage to those muscles during the pregnancy or at some point during the delivery process. These damaged muscles shorten and then heal in this shortened position, just like a scar that heals and tightens the skin in and around the scar. CMT is typically first noticed when an infant is 2-3 weeks old and the muscles have just completed the healing process or within the first few months when the baby's head tilt can no longer be mistaken for the somewhat "floppy" head control common to newborns. CMT is fairly common and usually easily corrected with proper diagnosis and treatment.

How do you know if your child has Congenital Muscular Torticollis? Answer these simple questions:

1. When I look at my child, is one ear typically closer to the shoulder on one side when compared to the other side?
2. Does my child often only look or even prefer to look only to one side?
3. Is my child's head flattened in the back on one side, rather than exactly in the middle?

If you are able to answer yes to any of the above questions, you can suspect that your child may have torticollis. It is important to see your physician and report your findings. Upon medical assessment, your physician will test the range in your child's neck and assess their developmental skills. Your physician will most likely recommend a physical therapy evaluation to fully evaluate your child's neck range of motion, muscular strength and gross motor skills. The most common treatment for Congenital Muscular Torticollis is direct physical therapy, which would include stretching exercises, strengthening exercises, belly play time, and developmental gross motor skills. The physical therapist will also give you a home exercise program so that all physical therapy activities can be easily carried over in the home.

Babies with Congenital Muscular Torticollis may also develop a condition called plagiocephaly, which is an abnormally shaped or flattened head. This condition arises because the baby's head accepts weight only on the flattened area due to the tight neck muscles. Once the neck muscles are stretched and strengthened, plagiocephaly usually disappears. In more severe cases, your physician may suggest a cranial helmet, which is a plastic helmet molded to your child's head to remold the skull. You may also notice asymmetrical facial features, a preference to use one arm over the other, and a difficulty tolerating the belly position. It is for these additional issues that it is crucial that you seek medical attention when you suspect torticollis. Mild cases of CMT can heal spontaneously without any treatment, but it is best to have a physical therapist evaluate the severity of your child's condition. With physical therapy, the majority of all CMT cases can be completely cured.