

Torticollis

Torticollis, or twisted neck, is relatively common in children. There are many possible causes, most related to spasm of the neck muscles. Not all causes of torticollis are serious. However, any problem with abnormal position or movement of the neck needs to be evaluated by a doctor.

What is torticollis?

Torticollis is a symptom related to turning or bending of the neck. Many different causes are possible. In newborns, torticollis usually results from injury during labor and delivery or the infant's position in the womb. Less often, it is caused by birth defects. In older children, torticollis may result from injuries to the neck muscles, common infections, or other causes.

What does it look like?

- Abnormal twisting of the neck. Usually, your child's head is tipped toward one side, with the chin pointing in the other direction.
- Painful spasms of the neck muscles may occur.
- Other symptoms may be present, depending on the cause. For example, there may be a tender lymph node (gland) if the cause is infection.

What causes torticollis?

There are many possible causes of torticollis. In most children, the problem is only temporary or can be managed with simple treatments. Less often, torticollis is a more serious problem. If your child has torticollis or any problem moving his or her neck, it's important to get medical evaluation to find out what's causing the problem.

In newborns, torticollis most often results from causes related to the muscles in the neck and shoulder area. It may be caused by injuries to the neck muscles during a difficult delivery. At other times, it's simply the way the infant was positioned in the womb. Less commonly, different types of birth defects may cause torticollis in a newborn.

In older children, possible causes of torticollis include:

- Injury to the neck muscles. Sometimes the trauma is minor, such as sleeping in an awkward position. Much less often, the vertebrae in the neck may become dislocated or fractured because of trauma.
- Infections or inflammation in the neck. The lymph nodes in the neck may become infected or inflamed, interfering with normal neck motion. Less commonly, torticollis may be caused by a deeper infection such as an abscess

in an area of the throat. Arthritis or other bone diseases are also possible causes.

- Even less frequently, torticollis may result from injury or diseases of the nervous system.

What are some possible complications of torticollis?

- For most common causes of torticollis, there are few complications.
- Rarely, if torticollis persists in a newborn, surgery may be needed.

What puts your child at risk of torticollis?

In newborns, large size, difficult delivery, and abnormal position during birth may increase the risk of torticollis.

Can torticollis be prevented?

Torticollis is usually an unexpected, unpreventable problem. Identifying and treating the cause may prevent complications related to abnormal movement and positioning of the neck.

How is torticollis treated?

Usually, the doctor can tell what caused your child's torticollis by examining him or her and asking some questions. If the cause is not clear, x-rays and other tests may be required.

Treatment for torticollis depends on the cause:

- *For newborns* with torticollis, gentle motion of the head and neck is recommended to stretch the muscles. Often, a physical therapist is involved. To avoid injury, this should be done only as recommended by a doctor.
- *For older children* with torticollis related to infection or inflammation, treatment may include:
 - Antibiotics for the specific infection.
 - Rest.
 - Anti-inflammatory medications (such as ibuprofen).
 - Passive motion to keep the muscles from getting stiff. However, the motion should not be painful, and you should never use force to move the neck.
- If the cause is related to trauma (even sleeping position) treatments may include:
 - Muscle relaxants such as Valium (generic name: diazepam).
 - Passive motion.
 - A soft collar or brace to support the neck.

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- For other causes of torticollis, it is essential to obtain and follow medical advice.

When should I call your office?

- Call our office any time your child has an abnormal position or movement of the neck.
- If your child's torticollis is related to infection or trauma, call our office if there is no improvement within a few days.
- Call our office if symptoms get worse or if your child develops any neurologic problems (such as numbness or weakness in the arms and hands).