

LA ORTHOPEDIC AND PEDIATRIC
PHYSICAL THERAPY PRESENTS

THE HEALTHY CHILD NEWSLETTER

WINTER EDITION 2019



Tummy Time Blues

BY: DR. JAY SEMEL, PT, DPT



“My doctor recommended tummy time, but my baby cries every time I try. How can I make him get better at tummy time?” It’s a question we hear all the time. You want to place your baby on his stomach, but not even one minute later your baby is crying, just begging you to pick him up. How in the world are you going to get your baby some quality time on his belly if you can’t put him down for a minute without him crying?

The Safe to Sleep campaign (formerly the Back to Sleep campaign), which launched in 1994, is a measure taken by the NICHD (National Institute of Child Health and Safety) to reduce the incidence of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS). It has been very effective and has reduced SIDS related deaths by over 50%. One drawback of this important campaign is that infants are getting less and less tummy time. In some cases, especially in those with decreased neck rotation and more limited active movement (Pediatrics. 2004 Oct;114(4):970-80) this is causing positional plagiocephaly and delayed motor milestones. Tummy time helps improve antigravity

muscle strength and developmental skills acquisition. It is important for children to lift their heads against gravity while on their stomachs to help develop those skills.

Obviously tummy time is important, but why is your baby crying when you put him on his tummy? Basically, your baby is not comfortable on his stomach because he is not used to it. Not only does he have to use muscles that he is not used to using, but it is also a new sensory experience for him. Imagine being suspended upside down and trying to hold a plank at the same time. No wonder your baby is crying when you place him on his tummy.

A word of caution before we get into how to improve tummy time: The risk of SIDS is greatest from 1-4 months or up until he is able to roll from stomach to back on his own. Even still, there is a risk of up to 12 months of age. Make sure that you always place your baby to sleep on his back and don't leave your baby unattended while placing him on his stomach.

So how can you get your baby to become more comfortable on his belly? Here are a few strategies to help:

First you will need to improve your baby's tolerance to lying on stomach. Place baby on your chest while you are lying on your back. This will give your child the experience of being on his belly with a more comforting and nurturing experience.



Next focus on building strength and endurance of the anti-gravity trunk extensors. When your baby is lying on his stomach he has to fight all the effects of gravity just to lift his head and neck. You can make this easier for him while still allowing your baby to strengthen the muscles needed to make tummy time easier. Hold your baby facing you and sit in a semi-reclining position (on a couch for example). Try to have your baby lift his head to look at you. As it gets easier you can gradually recline further and further while increasing the amount of work your baby has to do to lift his head against gravity.

A few pointers to help you along:

If your baby fusses in this position just start with short bouts of time – Maybe one to two minutes – As long as your baby remains calm.

Keep it positive - Don't have your baby lie on you when he's already irritated. You want to associate tummy time with a positive experience!

As your baby gets used to lying on you, you can try to experiment with placing him on a cushioned, but supportive surfaces such as on a tummy time play mat.

Short bouts of tummy time many times a day is better than long bouts for only a few times a day. Your baby will not be able to tolerate tummy time overnight and will likely be pretty fussy early on. So if it's only 30 seconds right now, that's fine. Keep trying and be persistent! Your hard work will pay off!

Remember that it will take time for your baby to become comfortable with the tummy time position. With persistence and patients your baby will come to enjoy tummy time and develop important skills that will help him the rest of his life!



Growing Pains: Something to Ignore?

by JOSHUA MAZALIAN, DPT, OCS, CSCS



I remember as a kid, anytime I felt pain it was brushed off as “growing pains” . I was led me to believe that it was normal and that it would go away. No biggy. This process continued to happen as the pain got worse entering adulthood. It was the start of postural problems in my youth that became my adult problems. But what if we started to treat a child’s complaint of pain as something real, possibly stopping the progression of problems into adulthood? Maybe we would save our kids from a lifetime of problems that plague most of us adults. In order to answer this question, we need to start by looking at the root of the problem.

As technology progresses, so do our postural problems. Kids hunkering down over an iPhone or a tablet will speed up the problems of rounded shoulders, sway back, abdominal weakness and so on. Even more than that, the lack of physical play and increased stationary time will indeed exacerbate that exponentially.

A common misconception is that children are injury proof. They sprain something, they will be completely healed in a few days unlike adults where it takes a toll. Doesn’t matter what they do,

they will be fine. It is adulthood when the problems begin. The problem is, if that were true, you wouldn't be seeing the imbalances in children that are commonly seen in adults. But we are. As a child moves into adolescence his/her body is forming. Just like their brains, we need to nurture their musculoskeletal system to form the correct way.

So you ask, *what do I do as a parent?*

As a practical measure, we need to start putting a limit on stationary play and increase physical play. Limiting the time on the couch and increasing the time children swinging from the monkey bars and using their full set of muscles is the best bang for your buck for a child's musculoskeletal system. Taking it one step further, is taking our children more seriously. When your child complains of foot pain, headaches, or back pain, take notes. Do they get abdominal muscle cramping on one side of the body when they run? Do they seem to want to lay down more than they want to be up and about? Knee or foot pain with walking? Chances are, it is a small imbalance that can be nipped in the bud. Finally, children should be having annual postural exams by a pediatric physical therapist, just as they see their Pediatricians for their annual check up.

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