

Making Time for Tummy Time

By Erika Gimble, Northside Parents Network member since 2004

“Babies – come on now – stretch, lift, one, two!”

No, babies don’t need to get to a fitness class, but babies today do need a little working out. More and more medical professionals agree that strengthening the neck and back muscles – via tummy time – is a necessity.

The Importance of Tummy Time

Although the back-to-sleep initiative has effectively reduced cases of SIDS by 40 percent, babies now miss out on the 12 hours of tummy time they used to get during sleep.

“When babies slept on their tummies, they lifted and turned their heads frequently to settle themselves down and to reposition during the night. This in turn strengthens the neck and back muscles, as well as the muscles of the shoulder as they use their arms to achieve this head turning during sleep,” said Gay Girolami, Pathways Awareness Foundation Medical Round Table member and pediatric physical therapist. “Parents shouldn’t attempt to make up the 12 hours, but they should incorporate tummy time into their child’s routine. Research shows a link between a lack of tummy time and the increase in delayed motor development.”

The Pathways Awareness Foundation Medical Round Table is a group of health professionals and researchers who are experts on early motor delays – pediatricians, surgeons, physical therapists and nurses. Based on mounting research and the wide variety of opinions on the amount of tummy time babies need, the Pathways Medical Round Table developed a set of standards for tummy time that outline when to start, how much babies need and the best ways to encourage tummy time.

Research shows that one in 40 babies is diagnosed with an early motor delay, and 400,000 babies a year are at risk. The term “early motor delay” describes a wide variety of conditions, ranging from low muscle tone to cerebral palsy. Some early motor delays are present at birth, and others develop or are exacerbated because the baby doesn’t get enough tummy time. The good news is that most cases are not serious, and with physical therapy and a strategy of tummy time while awake, most children can catch up quickly.

Starting with the Youngest

Newborns sleep – a lot. And parents are naturally mainly concerned with the basics: feeding, changing, bathing and bonding, leaving little time for anything else. Nevertheless, there are some tummy time tips for this age.

- Start small – aim for a few minutes at a time, several times a day.
- Lay your baby tummy-side down across your lap to settle him down instead of holding him upright on your shoulder

- Enjoy some together time. Lie down on the couch and place your baby “tummy-to-tummy” or “tummy-to-chest.”
- When carrying your baby around the house, carry her tummy-side down instead of upright.

As your baby grows (three weeks and up)

- Babies love faces. Place your baby on her tummy and get down on the floor with her!
- Voices are also great motivators. When your baby is on her tummy, talk or sing to her.
- Change your position to encourage head movement. Position yourself in front of your baby to encourage head lifting and to the sides to encourage head turning. If you see your baby prefers to hold his head turned to one side, try to do more activities to encourage head turning to the opposite side. If this is not changing and becomes the position of preference, bring this up to your pediatrician or health professional.
- On the floor, roll up a small towel or receiving blanket and place it under your baby’s chest and armpits to prop him up. Get down on the floor and play with him, and scatter some toys near him to look at and reach for. Mirrors are particularly interesting to infants, but mom’s or dad’s face is the most interesting.
- Play “airplane.” Fly baby around the room, tummy down.
- Incorporate tummy time into your daily routine. For example, every time you change your baby, do a little tummy time. Once your baby expects it, she may not protest so much!
- As your baby nears the end of three months, aim to get an hour total of tummy time. This shouldn’t be all at once, but in spurts throughout the day.

What should I do if I suspect early motor delay?

A recent survey showed that 95 percent of parents tend to “wait and see” if they suspect their baby isn’t developing on schedule. However, if your baby isn’t holding up his head or pushing up on his arms at the end of three months, it’s an important topic to bring up with your healthcare professional.

Trust your instincts. Parents are excellent at identifying motor delays when they know what to look for. At the end of three months (adjusted for pre-term birth), parents should look for the following:

While lying on tummy, baby can push up on arms and lift and hold head up.

Signs of concern are difficulty lifting head, stiff legs or little or no movement and pushes back with head.

Visuals, including a growth and development chart and more information about developmental warning signs, are available on the Pathways Awareness Foundation website, www.pathwaysawareness.org and by calling Pathways’ “parent answered” help line, 1-800-955-2445.