

# Health

RESEARCH » FLAT-HEAD SYNDROME

## Sleep position linked to delayed motor skills



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SMALL DOSES

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It's one of the great success stories of public health. The number of children dying from Sudden Infant Death Syndrome has plummeted in recent years after pediatricians began encouraging parents to put babies to sleep on their backs.

But the so-called "Back to Sleep" campaign has had an unintended consequence - more children are now developing "flat-head syndrome," a condition medically known as deformational plagiocephaly. Apparently spending so much time in one position can flatten the back of an infant's soft, malleable skull.

And a new study, published this week in the journal *Pediatrics*, has found a link between flat-head syndrome and a delay in the development of certain motor skills.

The researchers tested 472 babies, half with the condition and half without. The average age was six months. The results revealed that about 25 per cent of tots with flat head syndrome had less developed motor skills - such as the ability to grasp objects or roll over - than the other children.

"Our study is one of the first to fairly conclusively find that, in the first year of life, there are developmental delays among children having deformational plagiocephaly," said the lead researcher Matthew Speltz at Seattle Children's Hospital.

"These may be very temporary and short-lived delays that, on their own, go away. So we don't want to alarm parents at this point," he said, adding that the researchers plan to monitor the children for several years.

He also stressed that parents should continue to encourage babies to sleep on their backs.

"There is no doubt that the supine position has reduced the number of infant deaths



Crib deaths are down, but study says that babies need more 'tummy time' to offset the impact of sleeping on their backs. ISTOCKPHOTO

can be corrected."

The researchers can't yet explain their findings. But Dr. Speltz doesn't think that the flattening of the skull is actually affecting brain development. Instead, he believes that when some infants are placed on their backs, they are less likely to move around. And that means they are not as likely to acquire motor skills. Based on this interpretation, flat-head syndrome is simply a indicator of a child who is too immobile.

The problem may be corrected with more "tummy time," speculated Dr. Speltz. When babies are awake and can be supervised, they should be frequently placed on their bellies to play, he said. In this prone position, "they have to use their arms and hands to support themselves, they tend to roll around more and they have to hold up their heads to look around," he explained. In other words, they are encouraged to develop motor skills.

need to help babies with flat heads be more active."

### PARKINSON'S SHIELD?

The common pain reliever ibuprofen may help guard against Parkinson's disease, a new study indicates.

The research is based on 136,000 men and women who did not have Parkinson's disease at the start of the study period.

Participants were asked about how often they used non-steroidal anti-inflammatory drugs (NSAIDs), including acetylsalicylic acid (Aspirin), acetaminophen (Tylenol) and ibuprofen (Advil, Motrin). After six years of follow-up, 293 participants had developed the disease.

The study revealed that people who regularly took ibuprofen were 40 per cent less likely to get Parkinson's disease than those who didn't use the drug. Frequent users popped ibuprofen at least twice a week, primarily to dampen joint and muscle pain. The results will be presented in April at the annual

neuroprotective agent against Parkinson's disease," said the study's lead author, Xiang Gao of Harvard School of Public Health in Boston. Although the findings are promising, they must still be confirmed by other studies. And researchers have yet to explain why ibuprofen - but not other NSAIDs - appears to reduce the risk of the disorder.

Parkinson's disease is caused by the destruction of brain cells that normally play a key role in motor control and co-ordination. As more brain cells die, the patient gradually loses muscle control and is afflicted with involuntary shaking, slowed movement, stiffness and impaired balance.

### EARLY CANCER DETECTION

Pancreatic cancer is a silent killer. By the time most patients experience any symptoms - such as abdominal pain or jaundice - the cancer

is extremely rare.

But researchers at the University of California, Los Angeles, are providing fresh hope that the disease might be detected when it is still treatable. In a new study, published in the journal *Gastroenterology*, they found "biomarkers" - or distinctive substances - in the saliva of patients with the disease. The biomarkers could form the basis of a test to identify people with early-stage pancreatic cancer.

"We are now poised for the next step, which is a large clinical trial," said senior investigator David Wong.

James Farrell, another member of the team, said the researchers believe the biomarkers are produced in the salivary glands in response to some unknown body changes trigger by the pancreatic cancer.

For a test to be useful, it would need to be fairly accurate and produce relatively