

Getting *Well Ahead* in Life - How Cranial Osteopathy Can Help Your Baby

By Matt Wallden
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Imagine having your head compressed inside a tight rubber band for about 9 months (for a 30 year old woman, this would equate to about 1/40th or 2.5% of her life). Then picture that rubberised tube starting to constrict and compress, now your whole body is being squeezed, then suddenly something is clamped to the top of your head something hard and strong – stronger than you – pulling you further and further into a deathly squeeze.

Lights, cameras, action.

You are officially alive. This is a typical example of a forceps delivery for a baby after the head has been engaged for a week (which for a 40 week, full-term baby is 1/40th or 2.5% of its life).

Having survived probably your first near-death experience, you now have to contend with many new challenges. From moving around in a gravity-free, warm, protected, rhythmic fluid medium, your periphery is now exposed to a cold, hostile, gravitational field that feels very vulnerable. You now have to learn to breathe, to see, to move against gravity, to cry (– though that comes rather easily to many), and to feed through your mouth rather than your tummy. What a lot of stress – and you're not even a day old!

Nevertheless, this is exactly where cranial osteopathy can help concerned parents to rest at ease a little. As you may well know, a baby has a deliberately flexible skull comprised of 28 bones (6 of which are in the inner ears) so that it can withstand the crushing forces of labour and delivery. It is occasionally the natural phenomenon of birth, but moreover the use of forceps or ventouse (vacuum-extraction) delivery, that can create restriction or dysfunction in the flexible joints (sutures / fontanelles) of your baby's skull.

Self Regulation

Due to the fact that your baby's body is constantly self-regulating, with the passing of time any such restriction or dysfunction will usually come free. Often this occurs with a lot of crying – which is thought to not necessarily be due to your baby being in pain - but may be a natural means of raising the pressure inside the head, the "intra-cranial pressure", and is considered a means of self-correction. If the restriction does not come free however, then the child will attempt to compensate somehow, maybe by holding its head in an unusual posture or refusing to turn its head in a specific direction. If you have noticed this in your baby it may well be a good time to have your child assessed by a health care professional who works with babies – though this can equally be due to neck pain from the delivery or from sleeping awkwardly.

Orthopaedics

Orthopaedics is a branch of medicine we all associate with broken bones and joint problems. However, the origins of the word are "ortho", which means straight, and "paedic" which means child. The obvious wisdom behind this wording is to straighten the child out at an early age, so that it grows straight to achieve optimal function and minimise stress. Any slight deviation from anatomical perfection will unavoidably result in one part of the body having to compensate

for what another part is not doing. In the medical literature this is described as *gravitational strain* which culminates in a repetitive strain, or more correctly termed "cumulative stress" injury. When finally in later life the body can no longer compensate, it then goes into what is termed "decompensation", which is when symptoms start to appear. At this advanced stage it is probably too late to change the original problem and by now you are looking at a treatment approach, rather than a more preferable preventative approach.

Colic

One of the most common health problems that young babies suffer with, usually around 3 months, is colic - or other digestive problems that are often attributed as "colic" because no one knows what to diagnose. In some such cases, it may well be that the baby is suffering with a restriction in the movement of its cranial bones that is resulting in a compression or irritation of a nerve which leaves the skull and feeds the upper half of the digestive system, called the Vagus nerve. Sub-optimal function of this nerve will have a detrimental effect on the new and developing function of the digestive system. It is one of many potential causes of abdominal discomfort, but is worth assessment as usually just 1-3 cranial osteopathic sessions are enough to release any restrictions present, soothing the discomfort often in the first session. There are many other conditions that can be treated by osteopaths, such as facial / ear congestion, irritability, sleeplessness, attention deficit problems and other physical problems.

Osteopathy

Further benefits of seeing an osteopath are that they can provide a health screen, both for you and for your baby. As of 1997, osteopathy was the first CAM (complementary / alternative medicine) to achieve statutory recognition in parliament. This means that osteopathy is regulated from one central governing body - the General Osteopathic Council, which has equivalent status to the General Medical Council for doctors. This guarantees you, the public, that anyone calling themselves an osteopath has successfully completed an accredited course (usually 4 years full-time to degree level) and is a safe and competent practitioner. For peace of mind, please feel free to call with any questions you may have.

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*Matthew Wallden is clinic director at the **CHEK Clinic** in Leatherhead. Having practiced locally as an osteopath and naturopath for several years, he now works alongside his father who is a massage therapist and has a wealth of experience working with babies. Matthew also specialises in corrective exercise, and will shortly be writing about exercise for pre- peri- and post- natal mothers. He divides his time between his practice in Leatherhead, teaching at the British College of Osteopathic Medicine in London, and researching. Treatment is covered by most health insurance companies. Feel free to call **(01372) 374530** if have any questions or enquiries.*