

OSTEOPATHY, BABIES AND CHILDREN

It is a common belief that babies and children should have no structural stresses or strains in their bodies, because they are 'so young'. The reality is very different. Birth is one of the most stressful events of our lives. The baby is subjected to enormous forces, as the uterus pushes to expel the baby against the natural resistance of the birth canal. The baby has to turn and twist as it squeezes through the bony pelvis, on its short but highly stimulating and potentially stressful journey.

The baby's head has the remarkable ability to absorb these stresses in a normal delivery. In order to reduce the size of the head, the soft bones overlap, bend and warp as the baby descends. The baby's chin is normally well tucked down towards its chest to reduce the presenting diameter of the head.

Many babies are born with odd shaped heads as a result. In the first few days, the head can usually be seen to gradually lose the extreme moulded shape, as the baby suckles, cries and yawns. However, this un moulding process is often incomplete, especially if the birth has been difficult. As a result, the baby may have to live with some very uncomfortable stresses within its head and body.

Osteopathic treatment using the cranial approach is very gentle, safe and effective in the treatment of babies and children.

In an ideal world cranial osteopaths would like to see all children during the post natal period. Treatment (usually 2 or 3 sessions) can help to reduce some of the structural stresses and or strains retained in individual tissues following the birth process. We recommend that children be seen annually to check that they have not picked up any unwanted effects of knocks, bumps, falls etc and too ensure that balance and optimal growth and development in all areas are achieved for the individual child.

What problems can cranial osteopathy help with in babies?

Some babies cope extremely well with even quite severe retained moulding and compression, and are contented and happy. For others it is a different story, and they can display a variety of problems. Cranial osteopathy may help with:

- **Crying, screaming, irritability:** The baby may be uncomfortable, with a constant feeling of pressure in the head. This may be made worse by the extra pressure on the head when lying down.
- **Feeding difficulties:** The baby takes a long time to feed and one feed merges into the next. They may be a 'windy' feeder. Feeding is difficult and tiring due to mechanical stresses through the head, face and throat. The nerves to the tongue may be irritated as they exit from the skull, which makes sucking difficult.
- **Sickness, colic and wind:** Regurgitation of milk between feeds, bouts of prolonged crying due to colic and wind and is often worse in the evening. The nerve to the stomach may

be irritated as it exits from the base of the skull, which can impair digestion. The diaphragm between the chest and the abdomen may be stressed or distorted, which further compromises both digestion and the ability of the stomach to retain its contents. Stress from a difficult or fast birth can leave the digestive system in tension, trapping wind. Any strain through the umbilical cord, for instance if it was around the baby's neck, can add to strains in the abdomen.

- **Sleep disturbances:** The baby sleeps for only short periods, and may sleep little in the day (or night!). They wake to the slightest noise or may be "jumpy". The tension on the bony and membranous casing of the skull keeps the baby's nervous system in a persistently alert state.

What problems can cranial osteopathy help with in older children?

As the child grows, the effects of retained moulding can lead to other problems. The following are the most common, but it is by no means an exhaustive list.

- **Infections:** Retained moulding and birth stresses take their toll on the body's reserves, and also deplete the immune system. This leaves children more vulnerable to all types of infection.
- **Ear infection:** Recurrent ear infections, gradually becoming more frequent and may lead to 'glue ear' and some temporary loss of hearing. Retained birth compression within and around the bones of the ear impedes fluid drainage from the ear with partial or complete blocking of the Eustachian tube. Infections may never fully clear, leaving a vulnerability to the next infection and a depleted immune system.
- **Sinus and dental problems:** Persistent mouth breathers and children with constantly blocked or runny noses may be due to impaired growth and drainage of the sinuses and bones of the face due to retained moulding compression. Later, this increases the chance of dental overcrowding.
- **Behavioural problems and learning difficulties and special needs:** Poor concentration, constant fidgeting, difficulty sitting still, hyperactivity and a continuation of the restlessness as a young baby. Retained moulding compression makes them uncomfortable in one position for too long which becomes habit forming. Severe compression can modify normal patterns of learning in the brain. Severe birth trauma may be a factor in cerebral palsy, and conditions such as Down's Syndrome may involve restrictions within the head and body which may be helped with cranial osteopathic treatment.
- **Headache, aches and pains:** Headaches can begin at 7-8 years of age and in some cases even earlier. Some children suffer from growing pains and vulnerability to sprains, or other aches and pains. Retained moulding may focus areas of pressure in the skull, as the bony joints of the skull fully form at around the age of 7-8 years. Patterns of tension retained in other areas make the body more vulnerable to strain and fatigue.

- **Asthma:** Vulnerability to chest infections and aggravation of all degrees of asthma from mild to severe. Retained moulding compression can aggravate a tendency to asthma. General lowered immunity leads to more chest infections. After infections, the chest remains tense and the ribs do not return to full function, aggravating an asthmatic tendency. Osteopathic treatment to release birth stresses and help to improve chest function is often beneficial in reducing the frequency and severity of asthma attacks.