

OSTEOPATHY & BABIES

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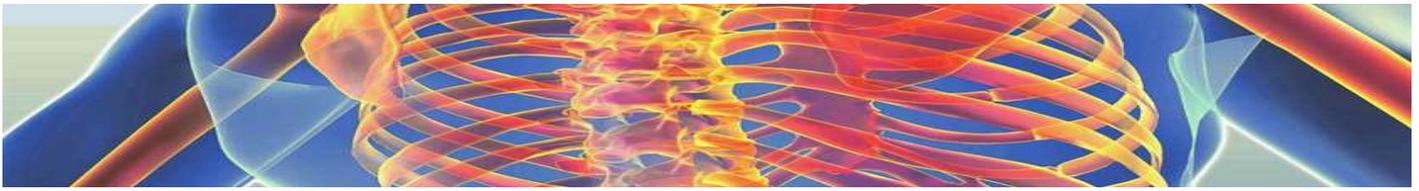
HOW CAN OSTEOPATHY HELPS WITH BABY'S DEVELOPMENT?

Osteopathy has long been used to successfully treat many infantile illnesses. It is a form of manual medicine that uses palpation to discern and diagnose soft tissue and joint mobility dysfunctions. These dysfunctions can affect the local structures around the joint or can affect areas of the body far away from where the source of the problem is found. The ultimate aim of osteopathy is to restore balance to the body in terms of neurological communication, blood and lymphatic flow, soft tissue and joint integrity. Once balance is restored then the body is in the best position to heal itself, and this is one of the fundamental tenets of osteopathy.

Birth is one of the more stressful events of our lives. The baby is subjected to enormous forces from the uterine contractions and squeezed through the pelvis out into the wide world. The contractions themselves serve two purposes, not only to deliver the baby but also to stimulate the baby's neurological system in preparation for independent life. Forceps or a ventouse, a caesarean or induction can aid the birthing process. The type of birth, duration and difficulty all directly affect the stimulus to the baby's neurological system. A difficult and lengthy birth can over-stimulate whilst a caesarean or induced birth can lead to an under-stimulated neurology.

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The neurological system is intrinsic to a healthy life and its distortion can cause a baby to react in different ways such as being difficult to settle, crying all the time, difficulty in feeding and sleep disturbance.

Neurological reflexes generated in and around the spine control most basic body functions. The new neurological system develops in response to stressors placed upon it, such as digesting milk in the digestive tract. Over-stimulation may lead to a tight diaphragm and cause reflux and hence irritation to the oesophagus from the acidic nature of the stomach juices. Under-stimulation may lead to a sluggish digestive tract and cause constipation and trapped gas. Areas of dysfunction in the body are indicated by aberrant tension in the skin and underlying tissues (myofascia), which can be felt upon palpation. By directing attention to these areas osteopathy can help re-integrate the baby's neurological system.

As a baby's spine develops it changes and adapts to accommodate the growing musculature of the baby. Originally it is a single C-shaped curve-the foetal position. As babies become more curious and start to look around them the neck muscles develop and the secondary cervical curve starts to take shape. When they start to crawl and hazard attempts to stand the lumbar curve develops. During all of this there is scope for inappropriate neurological signals to develop from areas of soft tissue tension and joint dysfunction.

So how can osteopathy assist a baby's development? By assessing the spine and palpating for abnormal levels of tissue tension. By aiding blood flow to and lymphatic flow from tissues, calming erratic neurological signals and assisting the growth of correct spinal curves. Abnormal myofascial tension in an area of the body is a sign that something is not functioning properly. This myofascial tension disrupts the correct flow of fluids to and from tissues and leads to congestion and a build up of toxins.

The presence of toxins can then provide an ideal environment for the disease process to take place and illness may ensue. Glue ear is a good example of this; the Eustachian tubes are horizontal in babies and function as a drainage mechanism for the ear. If tension exists at the base of the skull (the sub occipital area) the tubes by proximity can become stretched or compressed and therefore normal flow from ear to the throat cannot occur. This then leads to a build up of fluid, congestion and infection follows. By releasing the tension in the sub occipital area, relaxing the head and neck soft tissues and encouraging the flow of lymphatic fluid away from the head, the baby's immune system can deal with the infection and normal health can return. A second example of myofascial tension in the neck having far reaching consequences is the effect on the digestive tract. The phrenic nerve supplying the diaphragm originates in the neck and travels down to it outside of the spine, so if it is irritated by undue fascial tension it can cause the diaphragm to be too tight. The diaphragm is an important muscle in breathing and it also helps digestion by squashing the abdomen and pushing food through the intestines. Excessive tightness in the diaphragm can compress the oesophagus as it passes through it on its way to the stomach, this can cause reflux by not allowing food to reach the stomach, it backs up in the oesophagus and the baby vomits when it can't take any more food down.

Myofascial release techniques are used by osteopaths to restore balance to the body and reduce myofascial tension. They involve applying gentle stretches, with only a few grams of pressure from the hands, and this allows the fascia to 'unwind' itself. The gentle traction applied to the tight fascia will result in heat and increased blood flow to the area. This allows the body's inherent ability for self correction to return, thus eliminating pain and restoring the optimum performance of the body. Babies are very responsive to the power of touch and generally only require a few treatments at most to restore normal balance.

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