

## **What is cranial osteopathy?**

Cranial Osteopathy is a very gentle and subtle approach that osteopaths use to assess and treat both babies and adults, that aims to support optimum health and wellbeing.

Cranial Osteopathy relies on the same principles that Osteopathy is based upon, i.e. that there is an interconnection between our body's physical structure and how our bodies function. Good balance and alignment of all parts of the body, in particular the many kinds of joint and soft structure, allows the body's nerves and circulation to work at their best. Good function of the nervous system and circulatory system is important for good health and happy babies.

A Cranial osteopath examines and may treat the whole body, not just at the head, as the name implies. However a cranial osteopathy does pay particular attention to a baby's head.

A baby's head is not composed of hard bone like an adult's, but of a more soft, flexible kind of bone with delicate membranes that are perfect for adapting and coping with the demanding process of a normal birth, yet at the same time protecting a baby's brain.

The softness of a baby's head leaves his or her head more vulnerable to strain and distortion when there is lack of space in the womb. This is particularly relevant for twins, where space is a big issue. A cranial osteopath will check a baby over to see whether these strains have resolved by themselves or would benefit from some attention, and if so, he or she will develop a treatment plan for your baby.

## **My babies were born by caesarian, does that mean that they are less vulnerable to these strains?**

Caesarian babies have had a different birth experience to babies born unassisted, and therefore they can be prone to different strains. It is often assumed that an elective caesarian is a gentle birth experience for a baby with little stress or strain. This is not the case!

An obstetrician makes the smallest incision possible through which to deliver the babies. It is a tight squeeze for a baby to be maneuvered through such a small opening and a significant amount of pressure needs to be applied to a mother's abdomen (and consequently to her baby). Babies are slippery so an obstetrician needs to have a very firm grip! A caesarian delivery is a relatively quick procedure. It can be a bit of a shock for a baby to be plucked from its warm dark cosy home in the womb and to emerge into the bright lights of an operating theatre.

All in all, birth is a challenge for any baby. Being manoeuvred from the womb to the outside world is stressful and can result in strains and twists in a baby's body.

Lack of space in a twin pregnancy means a twin has less ability to move, stretch out and find a position of comfort. Twin number one, the twin that is lower in the pelvis, can have been engaged for a long period, with a sibling bouncing on top of him or her. I have observed that this twin is prone to having more tension in his or her neck and

their head can appear different to their sibling. Both twins would benefit from a cranial check, but it is a greater priority for twin number one.

### **Why take a baby to see a cranial osteopath? How do I know if I should bring my baby?**

These days many mothers bring their babies and children to see a cranial osteopath. Sometimes they simply come in for a check over, other times they come to see an osteopath wondering whether cranial osteopathy may help their baby or child with a more specific problem. Mothers have often heard that cranial osteopathy can help babies that are unsettled, struggling with their digestion, have difficulty latching on, and many other issues where a baby is not ill, but not quite right.

Cranial osteopaths don't really treat conditions per se. The aim of a cranial osteopath is to help restore and support a baby's physical function to its optimum.

When any strains or moulding in a baby's head are released, when their neck and spine are balanced, soft and flexible, when the chest and diaphragm are relaxed, overall wellbeing is enhanced and many of the troublesome issues associated with babyhood resolve.

An osteopathic checkover is something many cranial osteopaths wish midwives were trained to do, so that all babies could have a checkover soon after birth. "Health is not merely absence of disease", good health is so much more. Cranial osteopaths believe that their work with young babies and children helps ensure that physical foundations for good long term well being and development are firmly in place.

### **If my baby seems fine, are there any things to look out for that might suggest a cranial checkover would be a good idea?**

During my first consultation with a mother I always ask the following questions, to give me clues about a baby's overall physical function and wellbeing. A mother could also use them to help decide whether a cranial osteopathic check over is a priority for their babies or not.

Here are the questions:

- Does your baby lie straight, or do they tend to lie "banana shaped", always lying bent to one side?
- Does your baby have an uneven head shape?
- Forceps and Ventouse can leave a residual effect on a baby's head shape, has your baby's head "recovered from being born"?
- Is your baby very snuffly?
- Does your baby tend to favour looking to one side?
- If breastfeeding, does your baby latch more easily on one side?
- Does your baby have difficulty opening their mouth wide enough to latch?

- Does your baby tend to arch their back a great deal?
- Did your baby have remarkably good head control for a newborn right from birth?
- Does your baby have sluggish bowel function?
- Is your baby more unsettled than you would expect a baby to be?

If your answer were yes to any of the above, it would be worthwhile sending your baby to a cranial osteopath for a check over.

### **At what age can a baby have cranial osteopathy?**

Parents bring their babies to see us for two reasons, either their baby has a problem or the parents are bringing their baby in for a check over.

If a baby is under par, struggling, or you feel they are just not quite right, we recommend bringing a them in for a cranial osteopathic check over as soon as is reasonably possible; the youngest babies we tend to treat are 2 or 3 days old.

For a general check-over, then we recommend mothers bring their baby in when the mother feels well enough recovered from giving birth to be able to cope with an adventure outside of the home. This tends to be from about 2 weeks of age onwards. There is no reason why a baby cannot be seen sooner, or later, than this. In fact, it is never too late to bring a baby in for a check over.

If you are breastfeeding and your baby is difficult to latch on, an osteopathic checkover sooner rather than later is recommended, as resolving any neck and jaw tension and any unresolved strains and moulding in a baby's head can really help a baby to latch on with more ease. Early resolution of any breastfeeding problems is key to successfully establish breastfeeding.

### **How quickly do you see results?**

This depends upon the problem. Some problems are very simple and straight-forwards; others are more difficult and may involve many factors, some of which are not related to the field of cranial osteopathy. For this reason, when you see a cranial osteopath they will ask about your baby's well-being and general health, and they will ask you about your pregnancy and birth experience. Your baby will then be gently examined. Before treating your baby, your osteopath will have a chat with you about what they have found to give you a tentative idea of what to expect.

Some babies that have a checkover may need just one appointment, but others may benefit from a course of treatment.

Babies that have difficulty latching on often show an improvement immediately after a treatment. Babies with sluggish bowel movements often empty their bowels shortly after a treatment. Change tends to be a steady and progressive, but depends on the individual baby.

Sometimes, when a cranial osteopath sees a baby they may be unsure whether they can help. Depending on what they find when they examine a baby, they may propose

a trial of treatment, or they may refer you to another healthcare professional.

## **For expectant or new mothers, how can osteopathy benefit them antenatally or postnatally?**

### Antenatal

I asked one of my patients that recently had twins how osteopathy benefited her.

“ Treatment really helped me massively. I felt like my body was carrying the babies as best it could. Treatment helped keep my hips in line. The babies were in the best position all the way along. I didn't suffer from any unreasonable aches and pains. ”

Mrs. HS gave birth to healthy twins, at 37 weeks.

Osteopathy during the antenatal period aims to support a woman's body to work at it's very best, to help it adapt to and cope well with the demands of pregnancy. When aches and pains are nipped in the bud, it is usually possible to keep a woman feeling physically well and mobile. During pregnancy most women avoid painkillers. Osteopathy offers a safe way to reduce back pain, ease achy neck and shoulder and offer relief from tension headaches.

Space is an issue in twin pregnancies, so helping a woman's ribs stretch and open out, can help to create a little more space for her stomach and ease reflux symptoms, as well as creating a little more space for her lungs.

It is important to address back pain, pelvic pain, and hip pain as they arise. When given the appropriate care and treatment these problems tend to resolve quickly. As pregnancy advances, if problems in the above areas are not attended to they often become worse, more debilitating and also more challenging to treat.

Constant aches and increasing pain are all signs that an expectant mother would benefit from an osteopathic checkover. A checkover from time to time during pregnancy can really help an expectant mum keep her body working well, and keep annoying aches and pains associated with pregnancy to the bare minimum.

### Postnatal

After a normal or caesarian birth, with the loss of some abdominal support, a mother's back is vulnerable to strain and injury. For a healthy back it is important that a woman's spine has a good alignment and mobility, that her posture is reasonably good and that she steadily recovers her abdominal tone.

A postnatal check is beneficial for new mothers, as it supports recovery from pregnancy and birth. At a postnatal checkover an osteopath looks over the fine tuning of a mother's hips and pelvis, and spine as a whole, and gives a gentle treatment to release and relax any tension, strains and stiffness. Often tips and advice on how

maintain well being are given. An osteopathic treatment is always tailored to the individual's needs.

Motherhood is a very physical job. Mothers are constantly bending over prams, cots, cribs and changing tables, or holding their babies for long periods for feeding, winding and comforting.

The physical demands that a young family brings can lead to a build up to aches and pains, anywhere in the body, from the head and neck region, to the hands and shoulders, to the back, hips and pelvis, and even right down to knees, ankles and feet.

Osteopathic treatment from time to time can help keep these aches and pains at bay, maintain physical well being, aid relaxation and help a mother feel good in her body.

Pain is the way one's body speaks to one. Pain should be listened to and not ignored. As a general rule, if you over do things and strain yourself, the body is remarkable at healing itself, but if after 2-3 days you are not getting better, it is well worth seeing advice.

A woman's body is truly amazing! When it works well, when it gets enough rest and support, a woman's body's ability to take the challenges of pregnancy and parenthood in its stride is remarkable!

### **Are there any tips that you can offer for new parents?**

- Trust yourself, parenthood, is a learn as you go along experience
- Look after yourself. Your basic wellbeing is a priority, when you look after yourself you have more energy and resources to look after your family. A "centred self", is very different from being self-centred.
- Get enough sleep, even if that means going to bed very early or napping during the day. Sleep with your baby, don't see it as a chance to "get on with things".
- Eat a good breakfast.
- Have some protein with every meal as this helps balance blood sugar and your hormones. Regular small healthy snacks are good too.
- Make sure simple things that you enjoy are part of your life, a soak in the bath, music you enjoy as you feed your babes.
- Some daily stretches can help fight stiffness and prevent injury.
- When pushing your double buggy, avoid slouching, try and walk tall and engage your tummy muscles.
- If you don't feel well see your doctor straight away.
- An extra set of hands is a godsend, don't feel inhibited about asking your friends for help. It may just make their day to spend time with you and your family.
- Identify what really is a priority for you.
- Don't do unnecessary things.
- Lower your expectation of what you can do in one hour, in one day.
- Keep life simple.
- Get your shopping delivered.
- Good planning helps everything go more smoothly.

## Breastfeeding Advice:

Breastfeeding is something that often needs support and help. Breastfeeding should not be painful. If it is, then something is not right. I would recommend seeing a breastfeeding consultant sooner rather than later. Support in the very early days can help a mother get breastfeeding established

I have a fabulous cushion that I recommend to all mothers that are breastfeeding, called "My Brestfriend". It helps with good positioning for breastfeeding, but has another important benefit; it gives such good support to a mothers back and takes strain of her neck and shoulder. It helps reduce the fatigue and strain that comes with breastfeeding. There is now a special twins breastfeeding pillow.

*Written by Melinda Cotton, DO, Consultant Osteopath and director of Fulham Osteopaths. Melinda has been working with expectant mothers, mothers and babies for more than 20 years. Her team work in a purpose built practice on Fulham Rd, with parking space for buggies, and baby changing facilities. For any enquires about cranial osteopathy or osteopathic care during and after pregnancy, she can be contacted at*

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