

Osteopathic Treatment for the Newborn

Birth, A New Perspective

For centuries, in many parts of the world, highly trained birth attendants have seen it as part of their job to correct the stresses that birth has placed in the body of a newborn. This constitutes an acknowledgment that birth is a difficult process and that measures can be taken after birth to assist the baby in its recovery. In the industrialized nations of Northern Europe and North America, birth has been seen as an event that either leaves no negative impact upon the baby or one whose complications, whatever they may be, must be accepted and endured by both child and family.

Since the late 1800s, when osteopathy became a medical discipline in the United States, osteopathic physicians have assisted babies in their recovery from the birth experience, thereby helping to promote the best possible health and development of the child. Osteopathy is a medical discipline focusing on re-establishing and maintaining the natural relationships of bones, muscles, membranes, tissues and fluids within the body. Osteopathic manipulative treatment promotes the body's ability to function, develop and heal itself by addressing problems found in these structural components.

Many older children experiencing learning or behavioral difficulties have a history of a traumatic birth or early childhood head blows which went uncorrected. Children who suffer from recurrent ear or sinus infections frequently have a similar medical history. Although it is most useful to address the structural problems originating in the birth process shortly after birth, much improvement in the child's condition can be seen if treatment is initiated later.

The Birth Process

Birth often results in harmful structural changes. The likelihood of trouble increases when the labor and delivery is prolonged or augmented by pitocin or when forceps or vacuum extraction are necessary. In a vaginal delivery, the infant skull is asked to make its passage through too small a space. In response, the bones of the skull overlap to decrease the size of the head, and often do not return to their natural positions after delivery. In order to travel through the birth canal, the infant's head must bend markedly backwards. This puts pressure on two nerves (vagal and hypoglossal) which can result in the colic and sucking disturbances often seen in newborns.

Although C-section babies are spared some of the complications of vaginal deliveries, they are also robbed of some of the benefits. The transit down the birth canal applies a variety of pressures on the infant's head which help to free it from the shape it was molded to in utero. The transit through the birth canal also compresses and re-expands the chest wall preparing the baby to breathe and to clear fluid from the lungs.

Once the baby is born, osteopathic physicians hope to hear a fairly immediate and powerful birth cry. Fetal life would be fraught with low oxygen levels if it were not for the mother's higher blood hemoglobin levels and the baby's faster heart rate. The transition from life in utero to life outside is a critical time in which the baby loses its maternal support and must provide for its own oxygen. A strong birth cry probably serves two crucial functions. It opens the alveolar air sacs throughout the lungs, thereby ensuring adequate levels of oxygen so essential to brain development. It may also increase the internal pressure within the skull helping to re-expand those bones and membranes which were compressed in the birth process.

When to Seek Treatment

The infant will often communicate the presence of a problem by being irritable or difficult to calm. In addition, excessive wakefulness at night or reluctance to fall asleep, spitting up or vomiting can have their origins in structural disturbances. A parent or health care professional may notice visual signs of a structural problem, such as overlapping of joint lines on the infant's skull which do not level out in the first week of life. Visual asymmetries, such as one side of the forehead further forward than the other, the two ears positioned differently or the neck held to one side, can and should be corrected.

As the baby gets a little older, a parent may notice developmental delays. Although there are many reasons that children fall behind a normal developmental timetable, some can be successfully addressed through osteopathic treatment. The brain does rapid and critical development in the first year of life. The nerve pathways are designed to lay themselves down in precise geometric relationships. Even slight distortions in the structure of the skull can impair the development of the nervous system. These can manifest in developmental delays early in childhood and potentially more serious learning difficulties later.

Some children suffer from medical conditions for which conventional medical care has little to offer, conditions such as Down's Syndrome or cerebral palsy. Osteopathic treatment does not alter the underlying genetic defect or birth injury factors, but it can be very effective in enhancing the child's functional capabilities as well as improving general health and quality of life for the child and family.

Cranial osteopathy for the newborn is a safe, gentle, non-invasive form of manipulative treatment. Babies often fall asleep during treatment or fall into a deep, restful sleep thereafter. Sometimes babies fuss or squirm during the treatment, actions that can help release the troubled areas. It is safe and ideal to see babies very shortly after birth, but it is still quite feasible to resolve the effects of a difficult birth anytime in the first many months (or even years) of life. Depending on the severity of the birth experience and the structural findings, anywhere from a single treatment to a series of four to eight may be indicated. In complicated cases, further follow-up care may be needed.

A Doctor of Osteopathy (DO) is a fully licensed physician whose training includes, beyond the normal medical curriculum, extensive training in manual manipulation as a treatment to improve body function through addressing body structure. Although many osteopathic physicians are in family practice or providing specialty care, some have chosen to focus their practices on the hands-on approach which makes osteopathy unique. Of these, some have pursued additional training in cranial osteopathy, which is essential in the osteopathic treatment of children.

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