

## Cot death fears lead to rise in flat-head babies

By Allison Bray

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A NEW generation of flat-headed babies could be emerging due to the trend of placing sleeping babies on their backs to prevent cot deaths.

Holles Street maternity hospital in Dublin is now seeing about six cases a week of 'plagiocephaly'.

But the condition is only temporary and can be easily treated, said paediatric registrar Dr Des Cox.

While paediatricians still advise that infants should be placed on their backs while sleeping, they have noticed a surge in the number of plagiocephaly cases over the past decade, Dr Cox said.

The condition occurs in infants under the age of 12 months with premature babies being particularly susceptible.

"When the baby is born, its skull is made up of numerous bones, like the plates of the earth," Dr Cox said.

"As the baby grows, because he is lying on one side, one side of the head grows more than the other, leaving one side flatter than the other."

However, the condition is not harmful or permanently disfiguring and some parents may not even notice, he said.

In most cases it will correct itself as the skull fully forms or can be treated by a physiotherapy or simple exercises.

But some parents have taken the extreme step of so-called 'helmet therapy' to speed up the recovery process.

Such helmets, costing up to €3,000, are worn for several months while the baby's head is forming to remould the shape of their heads.

But Dr Michael Early, a consultant plastic surgeon at Temple Street Children's Hospital, said there is no evidence the helmets are any more beneficial than just letting the condition correct itself.

"Personally, I feel it's better for a lot of people to follow the route that once a child is toddling, the skull will slowly straighten itself out naturally. I would rather have a live child with a flat head that is only temporary," he said.

- Allison Bray

