**Abusive Head Trauma (AHT)**

**What is Abusive Head Trauma?**

**Abusive head trauma**, also known as ‘Shaken Baby Syndrome’, is a severe form of physical child [abuse](https://safeguardingcambspeterborough.org.uk/glossary/abuse/) and may result from shaking an infant by their shoulders, arms, or legs; or from impact (with or without shaking) caused by throwing or hitting a child. The resulting whiplash effect can cause fractures or result in bleeding in the infant’s brain and behind the eyes, which can lead to death or significant long-term health and learning disabilities.

Playful interaction with an infant, such as bouncing a baby on the lap or tossing the baby up in the air, will not cause the injuries associated with abusive head trauma. Instead, these injuries often happen when someone shakes the baby out of frustration or anger.

Nearly all victims of abusive head trauma suffer serious health consequences and at least one of every four babies who are violently shaken dies – babies (new-born to 4 months) are at greatest risk of injury from shaking. Inconsolable crying is a primary trigger for shaking a baby.

**Recent data on non-accidental injuries**

Some early releases of data suggest there has been an increase in non-accidental injuries during the coronavirus pandemic.

Great Ormond Street reviewed the number of cases of suspected abusive head trauma between 23 March and 23 April 2020. Ten children with suspected abusive head trauma were seen during this period, which is 15 times higher than the average for the same period over the previous three years (0.67 cases per month) (Sidpra, J. et al, 2020).

Between April and October 2020, Ofsted had over 300 serious incident notifications. Almost 40% of these were about babies, over a fifth more than for the same period the previous year. Over half of the cases about babies related to non-accidental injuries (Ofsted, 2020).

The government’s 2020-21 data on serious incident notifications found that from April to September 2020, there was a 31% rise in incidents of death or serious harm to children under 1 when compared with the same period in 2019 (Child Safeguarding Incident Notification System, 2021).

**Triggers**

Child Safeguarding Practice Reviews show that crying is the main trigger for babies being shaken.

Most babies start to cry more frequently at about two weeks of age, with crying becoming more frequent and longer lasting during the next few weeks and reaching a peak at six to eight weeks. After approximately eight weeks babies start to cry less and less each week.

It is completely natural for babies to cry, and it is important to remember that this will stop. Coping with a crying baby can be very stressful for parents.

**Who shakes and why?**

Research suggests 1 in 9 mothers may have shaken their baby and up to 2 in 9 felt like doing so.

The parents or the mother’s partner are responsible for Abusive Head Trauma in 75% of babies. 70% of perpetrators are males – fathers/ male carers.

The most at risk groups are:

* Male baby;
* Below 6 months;
* Low birth weight;

It affects approximately 24 of every 100,000 babies admitted to hospital each year.

Abusive Head Trauma can occur in every socio-economic group.

**What are the consequences?**

Nearly all victims of AHT suffer serious, long-term health consequences. Examples include:

* vision problems
* developmental delays
* physical disabilities
* hearing loss

At least one of every four babies who experience AHT dies from this form of child abuse.

**How can we prevent Abusive Head Trauma?**

Anyone can play a role in preventing AHT. Understanding the dangers of shaking or hitting a baby’s head against something, knowing the risk factors and the triggers for abuse, and finding ways to support parents and caregivers in their community are all ways to prevent AHT.

**If you are a parent or caregiver:**

Parenting is hard work! We know that every child and every parent is unique. You may face many different situations and challenges every day. It’s ok to ask for help.

* Understand that infant crying is worse in the first few months of life, but it will get better as the child grows.
* Try calming a crying baby by rocking gently, swaddling in a blanket, offering a pacifier, holding your baby against your bare skin, singing or talking softly, taking a walk with a stroller, or going for a drive in the car.
* If the baby won’t stop crying, check for signs of illness and call the doctor if you think the child is sick.
* If you are getting upset, focus on calming yourself down. Put the baby in a safe place and walk away to calm down, checking on the baby every 5 to 10 minutes.
* Call a friend, relative, neighbour, or your child’s healthcare provider for support.
* Never leave your baby alone with a person who is easily irritated, has a temper, or a history of violence.

**If you are a friend or family member of a parent or caregiver or live in their community:**

* Be aware of new parents in your family and community who may need help or support.
* Offer to give a parent or caregiver a break when needed.
* Let the parent know that dealing with a crying baby can be very frustrating, but infant crying is normal, and it will get better.
* Encourage parents and caregivers to take a calming break if needed while the baby is safe in the crib.
* Be sensitive and supportive in situations when parents are dealing with a crying baby.
* Be supportive of work policies (e.g., paid family leave) that make it easier for working parents to stay with their infants during the period of increased infant crying (i.e., between 4-20 weeks of age).

**Resources**

[ICON](https://iconcope.org)

[**https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/news/covid/non-accidental-head-injuries-in-infants**](https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/news/covid/non-accidental-head-injuries-in-infants)

[KSCP – Burns, Bruises and Scalds Protocol – 7 Minute Briefing](https://view.officeapps.live.com/op/view.aspx?src=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.kirkleessafeguardingchildren.co.uk%2Fwp-content%2Fuploads%2F2020%2F04%2FBruising-Burns-and-Scalds.pptx&wdOrigin=BROWSELINK)

**NSPCC** – their ‘Handle with care: a guide to keeping your baby safe’ is available from their website at [learning.nspcc.org.uk/leaflets/handle-with-care](https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/research-resources/leaflets/handle-with-care/)

**Stop that shake video** (8 minutes) is available to view at [www.youtube.com](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TMyCrKPa6GI&feature=youtu.be)

Information relating to abusive head trauma from **Serious Case Reviews** can be found on the **RCPCH** website at [www.rcpch.ac.uk/briefings-serious-case-reviews-scrs-child-protection.](https://www.rcpch.ac.uk/resources/briefings-serious-case-reviews-scrs-child-protection)

[NSPCC Learning](https://learning.nspcc.org.uk/Search?term=abusive+head+trauma)