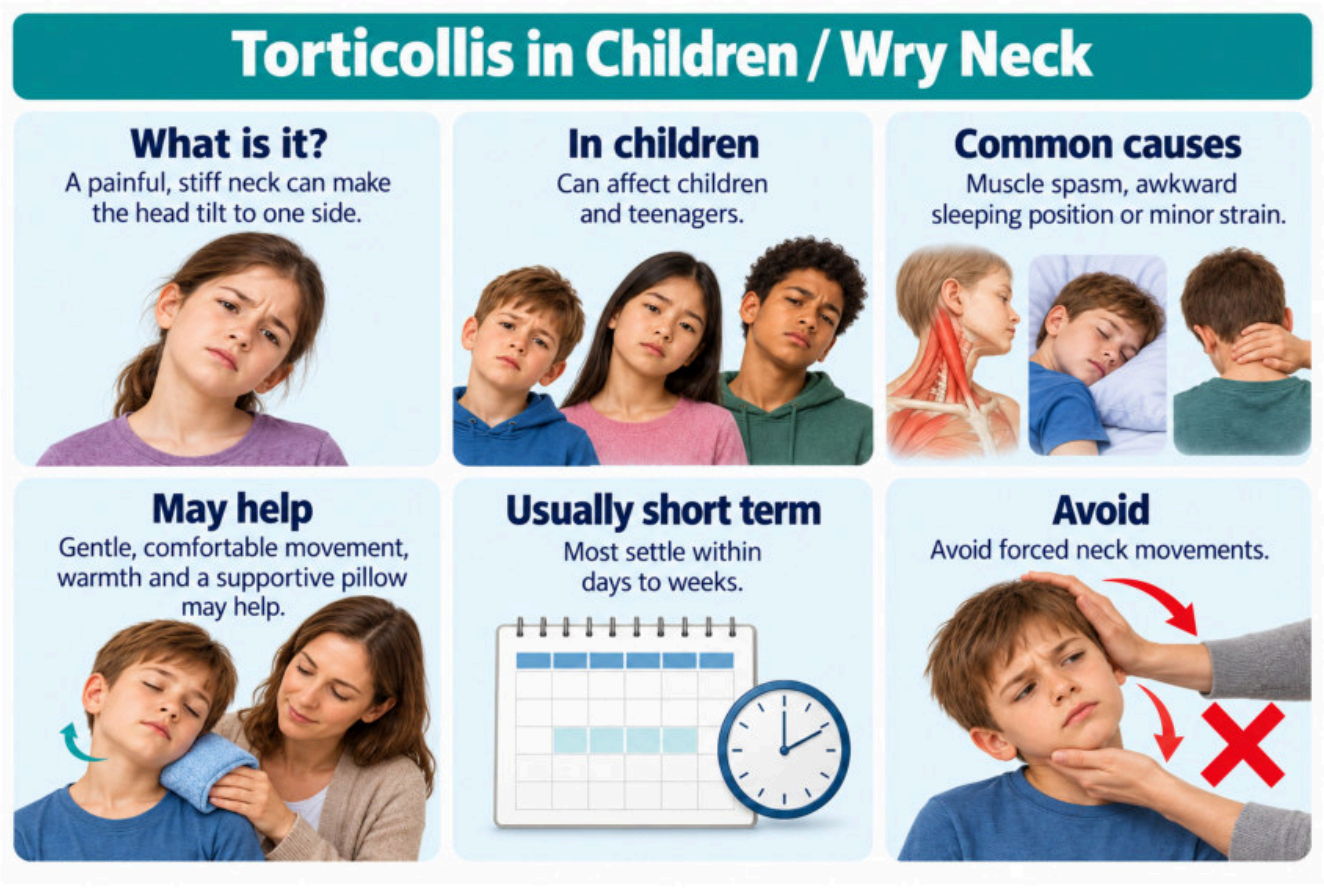
Torticollis in Children

Wry neck: understanding pain, stiffness and recovery

Torticollis in Children

A guide to symptoms, treatment and self-management



Understanding torticollis in children

Torticollis, also called wry neck or twisted neck, is a painful stiff neck that often tilts the head to one side. It can begin suddenly in children and teenagers. Most cases improve within days to weeks with simple treatment.

Supporting your recovery

Treatment aims to ease pain and relax muscles. Most children recover within 1-2 weeks. Parents and carers can support gentle movement and comfortable posture.

Understanding your condition

Symptoms, causes and when to seek advice

Possible causes

- Neck muscle spasm (most common)
- Poor sleeping posture or a sudden awkward movement
- Minor injury or strain
- Upper respiratory infection, particularly in children
- Rarely, cervical spine irritation

Sometimes no cause is found (acute idiopathic torticollis).

Typical symptoms

- Neck pain and stiffness
- Head tilted to one side
- Difficulty turning the head
- Muscle spasm
- Pain spreading to shoulder or upper back
- Occasional headaches

Symptoms may be worse in the morning and ease as the neck loosens.

Diagnosis

A healthcare professional examines neck movement, posture and muscle tension. Scans or X-rays are usually unnecessary unless symptoms are unusual or there has been trauma.

When to seek medical help

Seek urgent help if your child has severe neck pain after injury, fever or feels very unwell, stiffness with headache or light sensitivity, trouble swallowing or breathing, or arm/leg weakness, numbness or tingling. Symptoms beyond 2-3 weeks also need assessment.

Recovery reminder

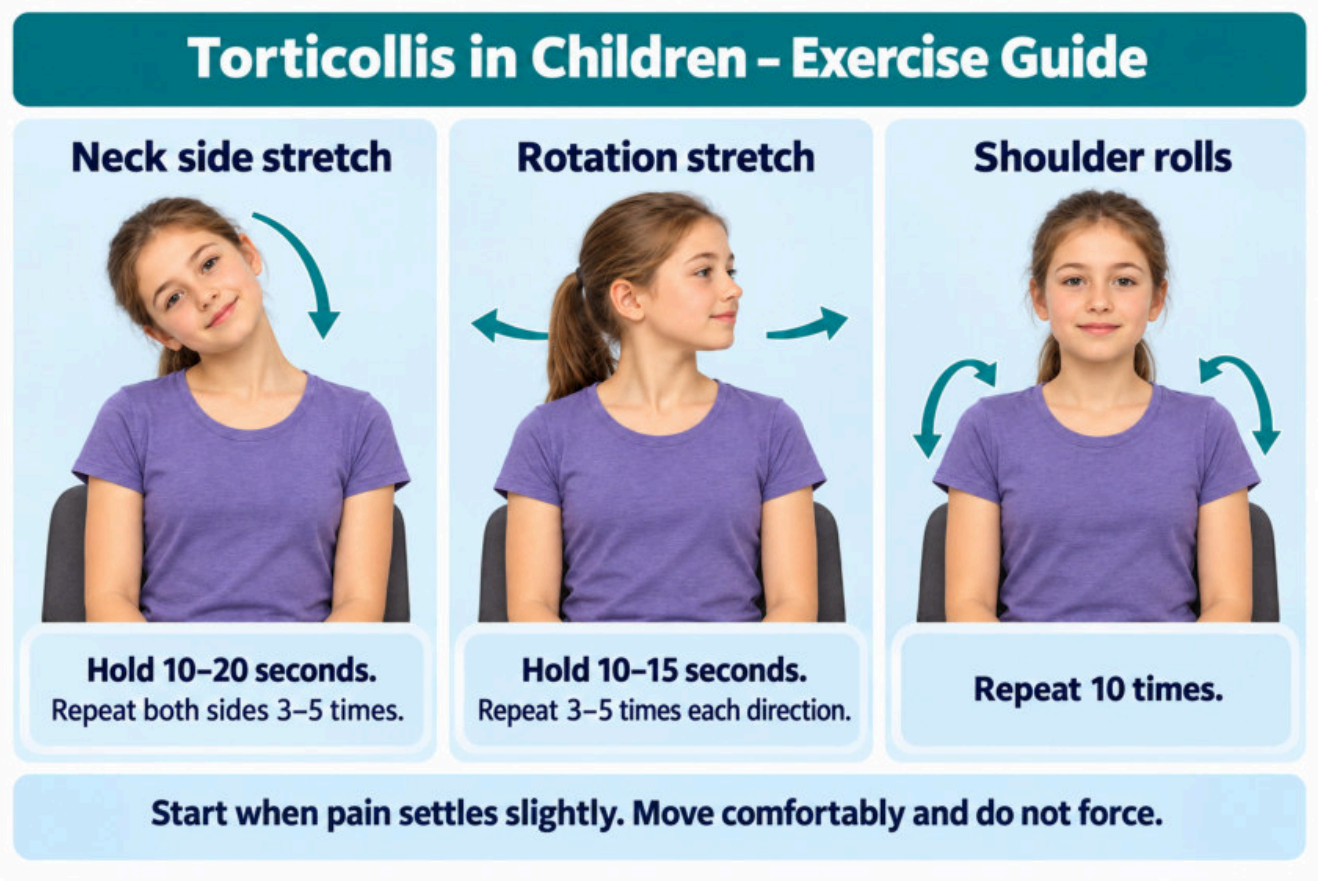
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Exercises and rehabilitation

Gentle movements under professional guidance

Exercise examples

Help your child start once pain settles slightly. Encourage slow, comfortable movement without forcing or pushing the neck. Ask a physiotherapist which exercises are suitable.



Exercise instructions

Side stretch: slowly tilt ear towards shoulder; hold 10-20 seconds; repeat both sides 3-5 times.
Rotation: slowly turn as far as comfortable; hold 10-15 seconds; repeat 3-5 times each way.
Shoulder rolls: gently roll backwards and forwards; repeat 10 times.

Exercise safely

Keep comfortable movement rather than holding the neck completely still. Do not use a collar unless advised. Avoid deep or forceful massage techniques.

Management and next steps

Self-care, treatment and when to seek help

Warmth and comfortable movement

A parent or carer can help with a comfortably warm compress for 10-15 minutes, 2-3 times daily. Encourage light, comfortable neck movement; avoid complete stillness or a collar unless advised.

Pain relief and massage

Paracetamol or ibuprofen may help if suitable for your child. Follow age-appropriate dosing and advice from your pharmacist or clinician. Gentle massage may ease tightness; avoid deep or forceful techniques.

Posture and sleep

Use a supportive pillow, avoid sleeping on the stomach and keep screens at eye level to reduce strain.

Seek urgent medical advice

- Severe neck pain after injury
- Fever, feeling very unwell or signs of infection
- Neck stiffness with headache or light sensitivity
- Difficulty swallowing or breathing
- Weakness, numbness or tingling in arms or legs
- Symptoms lasting more than 2-3 weeks

Recovery outlook

Most children recover fully without long-term problems. Symptoms can recur with posture strain or stress. Parents or carers should seek assessment for warning signs or symptoms that do not settle.

B-Well Physiotherapy Services

0300 303 4811

bwell.mskberkshire@nhs.net

www.bwellberkshire.co.uk