

## Caring for a child in a Pavlik harness



Physiotherapy Department

This information leaflet is for parents of children whose hips are being treated in a Pavlik harness. It aims to answer any questions you may have and show you how to care for your child during this treatment for their hips.

## Why are baby's hips checked?

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All babies have an examination of their hips at birth. This is to ensure the top of the thigh bone (femur) is in the right place against the hip socket (acetabulum). This forms the hip joint. The hip is held in place by ligaments, muscles and the joint capsule. For the hip joint to grow normally the femur needs to be held in the correct position to create a deep ball shaped socket. An ultrasound scan is the best way to find out how your baby's hips are developing.



## What is wrong with my baby's hips?

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The ultrasound scan that they had today showed that their hip socket(s) are not forming normally. This condition is called Developmental Dysplasia of the Hip (DDH). This means there is an abnormality either in the shape of the head of the femur or the shape of the acetabulum. It can happen to one or both hips.

When DDH occurs, it is important to understand that a baby's hips developed this way on their own. Even though as parents you may be distressed at discovering your baby has a hip condition, your baby will not find the condition painful.

## Is treatment necessary?

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If your baby is born with DDH, treatment is best started as early as possible. Your baby's hips are developing quickly and it is important that the hip joint is in the correct position as soon as possible. There are varying degrees of DDH and the role of the Pavlik harness is to encourage the femur into the right place to allow the hip socket to form. Your baby will need to wear the harness for several weeks and in most cases this will correct the condition.

## What is a Pavlik harness?

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A Pavlik harness is a lightweight soft fabric harness which is put on under the baby's vest next to the skin. It has a chest strap, two shoulder straps and four leg straps which attach to little 'booties'.

- A premature pavlik harness weighs: 80g
- A small pavlik harness weighs: 100g
- A medium pavlik harness weighs: 120g



You will need to know this for when your baby is weighed as you will not be able to take the harness off.

## How does the Pavlik harness work?

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The four leg straps are fastened to allow some movement in the legs, and to direct them into a position where the hip sockets will be able to develop normally.

## How long will my baby have to wear the Pavlik harness?

The answer to this question depends on the severity of your baby's hip condition. It will be decided by the results of your baby's hip ultrasound scans. Most babies need treatment in the harness for 12 weeks.

## Can the harness be removed?

The harness should only be removed/put back on by one of the clinicians in the hip clinic. The positions of the leg straps are very important to allow correct forming of your baby's hip sockets and to prevent any damage to the hips during the treatment.

## How do I care for my baby while in their Pavlik harness?

The first few days are often the hardest and it is common for your baby to be unsettled as they adjust to the Pavlik harness. You will have appointments fortnightly to check the Pavlik position and make adjustments to the straps as your baby grows.



We ask you not to adjust most of the straps yourself as they are in the correct position for the treatment. You should check the chest strap after feeds and ensure 2 fingers can comfortably fit between the chest strap and your baby's chest at all times. You can also check the calf straps occasionally to check they are not getting too tight.

## Nappy changes

Don't forget, the nappy always needs to go under the harness but please take extra care not to dislodge the straps. If the harness webbing gets soiled you can sponge with a disinfectant to avoid unwanted smells but staining is probably going to be inevitable.

## Keeping clean and skin care

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Your baby cannot have a bath whilst wearing the Pavlik harness so you will need to give your baby a sponge wash. Particular attention needs to be paid to the neck, shoulders, groin and behind the knees as these can become sore. Check for any red areas and if you are worried try some Vaseline®, Sudocrem® or equivalent. If the skin is getting worse please seek medical advice immediately.

## Clothing

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Loose fitting clothing, usually the next size up, can be worn over the Pavlik harness. Toddler size socks usually fit over the harness 'booties'. Some babies can get minor skin irritation from the harness straps. You can either wear a wrap-around vest which can be carefully used under the harness or tuck fleece around the shoulder straps to stop the problem. Do not put tight trousers or tights on your baby, as this pulls the legs together, which will make the harness less effective.

## Sleeping

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It can take a few days for some babies to adjust to sleeping in a Pavlik harness. To keep your baby warm at night, you can use the baby sleeping bags in a larger size which fit comfortably over the Pavlik harness. If your baby is upset, check the same things you would otherwise look for in an upset baby: teething, temperature etc.



Do not lay your baby on his/her side as it is not good for your baby's hips at this stage.

## Breastfeeding

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If you are breastfeeding you can continue to do so successfully while your baby wears the Pavlik harness. You could try curling up next to your baby, underarm feeding, or a 'v' shaped pillow to support the baby in the normal position. It can seem difficult at first finding the right position but eventually you will find a way which suits you both. Feeding may just take a little longer than usual and it is also a good idea to wind your baby more frequently.

## Out and about

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Most parents find their babies in a Pavlik harness fit into their usual car seat and pushchair without any problems. If your car seat doesn't work, or pushes your baby's knees together, look for a car seat with low sides.



## Between appointments contact us if:

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- Your baby's feet are constantly slipping out of the booties
- You feel your baby has grown and the Pavlik harness is too tight
- If your baby has persistent red marks around the shoulders or chest strap

## What happens if the hips do not correct with the Pavlik harness?

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We will discuss your baby's progress at each appointment and if we feel that the hips are not developing in the normal way even with the Pavlik harness, we will discuss future treatment options with you at this point as each baby is different.

## What happens when treatment is successful and the harness is removed?

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If your baby has been successfully treated with the Pavlik harness, congratulations! He/she might be uncomfortable for a short time and sleeping patterns may be disrupted as he/she adjusts to life without the harness. It is also normal for your baby's legs to take a day or so to come down from the frog-leg position and do not be afraid to handle your baby normally. You cannot hurt your baby's hips with normal activities.

After removing the Pavlik harness we will continue to monitor your baby at regular intervals. We will take X-rays as they grow, to check that the hips continue to develop normally.

### Reference source

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<http://www.steps-charity.org.uk/>

## Contact details

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If you have any questions please do not hesitate to contact us.

### Royal Surrey County Hospital

Physiotherapy Department

**Telephone (Direct Line):** 01483 464153

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Royal Surrey County Hospital (RSCH) NHS Foundation Trust fully subscribes to the National Patient Safety Agency (NPSA) *Being Open* best practice framework, November 2010.

### PALS and Advocacy contact details

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Contact details of independent advocacy services can be provided by our Patient Advice and Liaison Service (PALS) who are located on the right hand side as you enter the main reception area. PALS are also your first point of contact for health related issues, questions or concerns surrounding RSCH patient services.

**Telephone:** 01483 402757

**Email:** [rsc-tr.pals@nhs.net](mailto:rsc-tr.pals@nhs.net)

**Opening hours:** 9.00am–4.00pm, Monday to Friday

If you would like information documents in large print, on tape or in another language or form please contact PALS.

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