Be Careful When You Wrap Your Baby

Swaddling babies to keep them calm and comforted is an old, old practice that is enjoying a resurgence in popularity. The problem is, well-intentioned swaddling done incorrectly can potentially harm the baby.

Routinely wrapping a baby too tightly or rigidly in a blanket or other material can cause problems with the proper development of the hip joints and lead to developmental dysplasia of the hip (DDH).

What Is DDH?
DDH occurs when the ball of the hip becomes dislocated from the hip socket. It is a common, serious condition. Without treatment, DDH can cause a limb length discrepancy, significant pain and, eventually, arthritis. Treatment for DDH can be lengthy and difficult.

Research is showing that forcing the hips and knees of infants to remain straight, as they do when wrapped tightly in a blanket, or swaddled, causes an increase in tension in the hamstring and hip muscles, which may lead to a loosening of the surrounding ligaments, and eventual dislocation of the bone from the hip socket.

Treatment for DDH in very young infants may include positioning the hip properly with a harness that keeps the ball of the hip in its socket by holding the affected knee toward the child’s head. A shoulder harness attaches to foot stirrups to keep the leg elevated. This treatment can last six to 12 weeks, or until ultrasounds confirm that the hip location is normal. For infants younger than 18 months, the affected bone can be manually set into place while the child is under anesthesia.

How to Swaddle Safely
The key to a safe swaddle is to make sure the blanket is loose enough around the legs to allow the infant to bend his or her legs up and out. “Swaddling in general is OK from an orthopaedic standpoint as long as the swaddling leaves the hips and knees free to bend and move,” said Ellen Raney, M.D., orthopaedic surgeon at Shriners Hospitals for Children — Portland.

The American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons, Pediatric Orthopaedic Society of North America, Shriners Hospitals for Children and other national medical organizations are supporting the International Hip Dysplasia Institute’s (IHDI) call to raise awareness and educate parents on healthy swaddling.

“Our physicians at Shriners Hospitals for Children have an opportunity to reach out and educate the public about a very common practice that could be affecting the children of their community,” said Todd Milbrandt, M.D., orthopaedic surgeon at Shriners Hospitals for Children — Lexington. “Through simple training, we can change the outcome and potentially prevent a long-term hip condition for these babies.”

Watch a Swaddling Demonstration
IHDI has posted a video on YouTube that shows how to swaddle an infant in a square blanket in a manner that is safe for the hips. Watch it at http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LLqfRQdUP7k.