

What is Cranial Osteopathy?

Osteopaths view the body as a unique, interconnected, self-healing system. They believe that the structure and the function of the body are closely related, and a disturbance in the body's framework can interrupt the natural function of multiple systems, causing a wide range of symptoms. Cranial osteopathy is a specific type of extremely gentle osteopathic treatment, which focuses on relieving stress and tension throughout the body. Because it's such a gentle form of therapy, it can be practised on people with a wide range of conditions, and is suitable for all ages, from newborns to the elderly.

Cranial osteopathy was founded by William Garner Sutherland, a pupil of the founder of osteopathy Andrew Taylor Still, in the 1930s. As a student, studying the structure and function of the human skeleton, Sutherland was particularly interested in the way the bones of the skull fit together. This fascination led him to investigate particular structure of the skull bones and their slight malleability. It was this investigation that led to the development of cranial osteopathy and to the understanding of the role of cranial motion in health and sickness.

Cranial osteopaths are trained to feel and interpret a very delicate, rhythmic shape change that exists in all body tissues. This motion, called 'Involuntary Motion' or 'Cranial Rhythm,' comes about due to the particular movement of cerebrospinal fluid bathing the spinal cord and the pull of the soft tissue connexions to the cranial bones. This involves a rhythmical elongation and narrowing, followed by a shortening and widening. This cycle repeats approximately every 10 seconds, and is separate to the rhythm generated through breathing.

The cranial rhythm was first described by Dr Sutherland in the early twentieth century, and its existence was confirmed by a series of laboratory tests in the 1960's and 70's. The motion is completely involuntary and so small in amplitude that only specially trained practitioners can feel its motion throughout the body.

Tensions and stresses throughout the body are expressed as a disruption of the body's natural cranial rhythm. As with traditional osteopathy, cranial osteopaths will perform a thorough case history and examination of their patients, however, treatment will consist of observing and treating disruptions in the cranial rhythm, whether they be due to recent events or as retained tensions due to past incidents including emotional events.

Cranial osteopathy is simply another 'tool' in the osteopathic tool box and is taught to a greater or lesser degree in all osteopathic schools; however, practitioners may choose to further their knowledge and experience of cranial therapy by doing a post-graduate course and some practitioners choose to treat solely with cranial techniques.

[Erika Dannmayr](#), a cranial osteopath based in [Beckenham](#) in London explains how cranial osteopathy works and what it can treat. Erika explains that cranial osteopathy is a very relaxing and gentle therapy to receive. She uses "gentle manipulation of the cranial bones, spine, pelvis, and other soft tissue structures in order to identify restrictions or strain patterns occurring throughout the body"; be them as a result of retained birth trauma or of repetitive activity or even

trauma. “The treatment aims to match the error pattern and emphasize it in order to affect a ‘release’, and a return to ‘normal’. The patient may be unable to detect any discernable movement occurring”. When a structure is disturbed, it can have knock-on effects on function and normal body rhythms creating body wide responses”.

Who is it for? Everyone!

“Cranial osteopathy can be of particular benefit to mothers and babies post childbirth”. Birth is one of the most stressful events of our lives and the compressive forces exerted on the body during this process can contribute to a lot of musculoskeletal problems sooner or later in life. In the latter part of pregnancy, the baby changes position in preparation for birth (engages). “If the baby engages in an awkward position it can cause abnormal strains to the cranial bones (intra-uterine compression)”, which are particularly mobile in babies in order to aid the passage through the birth canal.

Similarly, when the birth is particularly traumatic or very long or very short, the head gets exposed to abnormal forces and can result in additional stress to the cranial bones limiting their ability to expand on the baby’s first breath. “Even c-sections can be traumatic for the baby”. The sudden exposure into the world comes as a ‘shock’ as the baby hasn’t had time to prepare. The result of these abnormal compressions and subsequent inadequate expansion of the head on the first breath is that the “baby can be left with a feeling of pressure inside the head. Signs that your baby may be experiencing birth compression might be; constantly crying irritable baby, sleep disturbances, feeding problems, wind, colic, sinusitis and ear, nose and throat disorders. The abnormal tensions in the cranial bones can also affect the nerves exiting from the skull. Babies can develop nausea and colic when the nerve supplying the stomach is irritated as it passes out the skull when the cranial base is misaligned.”

Cranial osteopathy may also be able to help with irregular head shapes (following forceps / suction cap deliveries). However, Ericka explains that the success of the treatment will depend on how soon you bring the child in for treatment. Since, as we age, our bones start to ossify (harden) and their malleability is reduced.

And for mothers? During pregnancy, the body has to adapt to a constantly changing physical and chemical environment. Subtle treatment such as cranial osteopathy can help to transition the body in a non-traumatic way, as well as helping to return it back to ‘normal’ post birth.

What about everyone else? “Cranial osteopathy may be of benefit to adults who are afraid of more physical spinal manipulation, particularly when the nervous system is out of balance as with migraine, period problems, and irritable bowel syndrome. It can be a gentle, yet effective way to treat the same musculoskeletal problems presenting to traditional osteopaths such as; osteoarthritis, neck/back pain, frozen shoulder.”

How many sessions will I need? As with all therapy, “this depends on the duration of the complaint and the complexity of the strain pattern. As an example, babies with colic might receive 3-5 sessions.”