

Fractures in infants under 18 months

Any fractures in an infant under 18 months should be taken very seriously as a possible indicator of an abusive injury. The child should always be assessed by a consultant paediatrician.

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Skull fractures in infants are not always a result of abuse and are seen more frequently in accidental trauma than in abuse in those aged less than 18 months.

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In infants aged less than 18 months, fractures of the upper arm (humerus) are significantly more likely to be due to abuse than accidental injury. Greenstick fractures (where the bone bends and cracks, rather than breaking into separate pieces) may occur accidentally in the lower arm (radius and ulna).

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In children under 3 years, one-third fractures of the upper leg (femur) are due to abuse. In infants under 18 months, fractures of the lower leg (tibia and fibula) are more likely to be due to abuse than to accidental injury.

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Studies have shown that in children aged less than one year, 25-56% of all fractures are a result of an abusive injury. Infants who are not independently mobile are very unlikely to sustain accidental fractures, so the younger the infant, the more likely it is that the fracture is a result of an abusive injury.

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Fractures in multiple sites are more likely to be due to abuse than single fractures.

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Rib fractures are more likely to be due to abuse than to accidental injury.

