Baby's Skull Rebuilt 'Like A Jigsaw Puzzle' To Fix Fused Bones

Katie Moisse

Ryan Burke was born with a misshapen head – a common consequence of natural birth. But when the lopsidedness lingered for three months, his parents got worried.

"His pediatrician recommended we go see a neurosurgeon," said Ryan's mom, Leah Burke, recalling the "terrifying" moment she heard her baby needed skull surgery.

Ryan was diagnosed with craniosynostosis, a birth defect that causes the bones of his skull to close prematurely.

"A baby's head is composed of different bones with spaces in between called sutures," said Dr. David Sandberg, a pediatric neurosurgeon at Children's Memorial Hermann Hospital in Houston, explaining how the sutures allow space for a baby's growing brain. "When the sutures close early, the brain keeps growing. But it can't grow in the direction of the closed sutures, so the child's head becomes very lopsided."

Baby Goes Home After Surgery to Mend Face, Brain

Ryan had a fused lambdoid suture – a joint that spans the back of the skull. As his brain grew, his ears became lopsided.

"It will only get worse over time, not better," said Sandberg. "And it's very difficult to correct when kids are older."

Leah Burke dreaded the thought of surgery, but knew it was the right move. The family decided to relocate temporarily from Oklahoma City to Burke's hometown of Houston for the surgery, where they could be surrounded by family and friends.

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