** Sling users guide**

**Ergonomic positioning:** At birth, a baby’s spine and hips are still immature. The spine is naturally rounded, in a c-shape, and not designed to be straight. The spine and the hip joints are fairly soft and flexible. To support and protect a baby’s developing spine and hips, it is important that the carrier is able to support the baby’s back, hips and back of the head.

* To support the **back**, the carrier needs to allow the baby’s back to remain in its natural rounded position, and the fabric should be snug enough so that the baby doesn’t slump in a slouched position, especially when asleep.
* To support the **hips**, the carrier should allow the baby to assume a position known as spread squat, or M position, where the baby’s bottom sits lower than his or her knees and the fabric should support the baby’s thighs. This allows for the balls of the hips to sit adequately in their sockets.
* The fabric should be high and snug enough to support the back of the baby’s **head** (it should also be adjustable so it comes no higher than this). This is especially important in newborn babies.
* Babywearing instructors do not recommend carrying a baby **facing out** in a sling, as it forces the baby’s back straight against the wearer’s chest, and does not allow the baby to assume the spread squat position (it causes the legs to dangle in a harness like position)..
* Finally, for the comfort of the parent wearing the baby, it is important that the carrier is **high** and tight on the parent’s body, to avoid causing back strain and displacing the wearer’s centre of gravity. As a rule of thumb, the baby should be placed close enough for the wearer to be able to kiss the baby’s head.

**Front pack high street carriers:** Unfortunately, few of the major carrier brands sold on the high street meet the ergonomic criteria highlighted above. Many carriers put a baby in a dangling position, much like sitting in a harness, with all of the baby’s weight resting on his crotch rather than being spread from his bottom and thighs. The baby’s back is also forced into a straight position. This type of sling also places the baby too low, with the baby’s head at mid-chest level.

**Different types of slings:** There is a plethora of baby carriers available. The range of baby carriers available in the UK fall into four categories: wraps, mei tais, soft structured carriers, and ring slings/pouches.

* **Wraps**, which come in both stretchy and woven varieties, are long pieces of cloth that are tied around the baby and parent.
* **Stretchy wraps** are made of a soft, stretchy t-shirt-like material. One of their advantages is that they can be left tied on. Due to the nature of the fabric, most parents find that stretchy wraps are not supportive enough for babies aged six months or more. A stretchy wrap needs to be used with several layers around the baby to ensure adequate support, which can make wearing a stretchy wrap uncomfortable in hot weather.
* **Woven wraps** are diagonally woven cloths, which gives the fabric the ideal amount of stretch and support. They are the most versatile form of carrier available, as they automatically adjust to the size of the carried child. They can be used from birth to toddlerhood and beyond, and can be worn on the front, hip and back and tied in many different ways. It is, however, more complicated to master tying a woven wrap than a more structured carrier.
* **Mei tais** are Asian-style carriers consisting of a rectangle shaped piece of fabric with 4 straps. One set of straps is tied around the wearer’s waist and the other around the wearer’s shoulders, the fabric forming a pocket for the baby. They are easy to use and can be worn on the front, hip and back. As the weight is spread on both shoulders and hips through the straps, they are comfortable to use with older babies and toddlers. They come in different sizes: baby, toddler or preschooler.
* **Soft structured carriers** are a hybrid between a mei tai and a rucksack: the body is similar to a mei tai but this type of carrier has structured waists and padded shoulder straps which can fasten with buckles or straps. They are very easy and comfortable to use. The advantage of the buckles is that the shorter straps do not trail on the floor, which can be useful in winter/wet weather.
* **Ring slings** are pieces of cloth with two rings sewn at one end. The free end is looped through the rings, forming a pouch for the baby, with the tail of the fabric hanging down. They are worn over one shoulder. They are very quick to put on but require practice to get the adjustment right. The rings offer more adjustability than a pouch. Unpadded ring slings are easier to adjust, and the ones made out of woven wrap material are the comfiest to use
* **Pouches** are also worn over one shoulder. They are made of one folded length of material that forms a pocket for the baby and is worn over the body like a sash. Unless they are adjustable, they need to be sized for the wearer so one pouch cannot be used with two parents of very different sizes.

**Sling safety:** The British Association of Babywearing Instructors (<http://babi.me.uk/>) offers these guidelines, known as TICKS

* Tight
* In view at all times
* Close enough to kiss
* Keep chin off the chest
* Supported back

The safest position for a baby to be carried is in an **upright position.** Lying down cradle-type positions are best avoided with newborns, as it is difficult to ensure the position is safe with no chin-to-chest posture.

**Avoid bag style slings** which unsafe for small babies as they put babies in a dangerous position (chin-to-chest) and cover their faces with fabric, creating an asphyxiation risk. The Infantino was recalled in 2010 due to deaths in the US, but similar shaped brands are still sold in the UK. For more info see [www.babyslingsafety.blogspot.com](http://www.babyslingsafety.blogspot.com)

**Breastfeeding in a sling:** It is possible to breastfeed in a sling, but one hand is needed to support the baby’s neck. Breastfeeding is a skill, and so is baby wearing, so it is important to master both skills separately before attempting to breastfeed in a sling. If breastfeeding in a sling, be particularly aware of the risk of positional asphyxia at all times: avoid the chin-to-chest position and make sure that the baby’s face is not pushed into the breast. It is probably safer and easier to wait until the baby is a few weeks old and can hold his head. For videos of how to breastfeed in a sling see <http://thefunnyshapedwoman.blogspot.co.uk/2011/10/milk-to-go-breastfeeding-in-sling.html>

**Learning to use slings:** There are 3 options for those who want to learn how to use a sling: they can teach themselves, attend a sling meet or a sling library, or have a consultation with a qualified sling consultant. There are many photo and video tutorials on the internet eg. [www.theslingschool.com/p/instructions.html](http://www.theslingschool.com/p/instructions.html) [www.slingababy.co.uk/#!videos/c16jz](http://www.slingababy.co.uk/#!videos/c16jz)

* **Slingmeets** are informal sling drop-in sessions run by volunteers. They are free to attend. A list is available at [www.slingmeet.co.uk](http://www.slingmeet.co.uk)
* **Sling libraries** are drop-in sling lending sessions run by volunteers. A fee and deposit are required to hire a sling. The list of UK sling libraries can be found at <http://ukslinglibraries.wordpress.com>
* **A consultation** with a qualified consultant can be held at the parent’s or consultant’s home and usually lasts a couple of hours. A list of UK babywearing consultants is available here [www.babywearing.co.uk/localsupport/#map\_top](http://www.babywearing.co.uk/localsupport/#map_top)

**Where to buy slings:** Few high street retailers stock slings that meet the ergonomic criteria highlighted above. There are however, many online stores selling carriers. There are also several small businesses, listed on the sling guide website [www.slingguide.co.uk/sling-resource](http://www.slingguide.co.uk/sling-resource). Beware of Ebay and non-approved online retailers, as there are many fake poor quality copies of well-known brands such as Ergo, Freehand and Moby circulating on the internet.