

Labour and Birth in Water

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The use of water during labour and birth has become increasingly popular since the 1980's.

Using water for labour can help make you to feel more in control and involved in decisions about your labour.

The use of water when you are in labour is recommended in a low-risk pregnancy. It is important that if you are considering using water for labour and/or the birth of your baby that you read this leaflet and have an opportunity to discuss it with your midwife.

How is water used during labour?

Water use during labour and birth ranges from a woman in early labour using her bath at home for pain relief, to women giving birth in a specially designed birthing pool in a maternity unit or in their own home.

How does water help?

The buoyancy of water and the freedom of movement provided by a bath or birthing pool have been shown to reduce the pain of labour and help coping with contractions.

During the first stage of labour, when your cervix is dilating, immersing your body in water will:

- Help shorten the length of your labour
- Help you to relax
- Help you to cope better with your contractions
- Reduce your need for an epidural
- Reduce the need for medical intervention by doctors and midwives (e.g. drugs that speed up your contractions)
- Increase your chances of a natural birth

During the second stage of labour, when you are pushing, being in water will:

- Make you feel more in control as you will follow your body's natural urges.
- Change the elasticity of your skin and help you to push more steadily and effectively.
- Help provide your baby with a gentler transition into life outside the womb (uterus).

How safe is it?

Research did not show any increase in harm for mother and baby when the pregnancy was straightforward and labour started spontaneously.

If you choose to give birth in the water your baby is gently lifted head first to the surface within one minute of the birth. Exposing your baby's face to the air will stimulate him/her to breathe.

Who can use a birthing pool?

You can use water for labour:

- If you and your baby are healthy
- If your pregnancy has been uncomplicated
- If your labour starts spontaneously between 37 and 42 weeks
- If you are having regular, painful contractions and your cervix is at least 4cm dilated.

Can I use a birthing pool if my waters have broken?

If your waters have broken within the last 24 hours and the colour of them is clear it is safe to use the pool. If it is more than 24 hours since your waters broke you have an increased risk of infection for you and your baby, therefore the recommended place to be in labour is in hospital and not in water.

If you have been told that you have Group B Strep (GBS) in your current pregnancy it is safe to use water during labour and/or the birth of your baby. You will be advised to have antibiotics through a small tube in your hand which will be covered with a waterproof dressing. Some research has shown that GBS is less likely to be transferred to your baby if you give birth in water. It is important that you discuss this with your midwife before you use the pool.

How hot is the water?

When you are in the pool your midwife will monitor both the water temperature and your temperature at least every hour. The water temperature should be comfortable but not more than 37.5 degrees Celsius. This is to ensure that your baby does not get too hot in the womb which could cause distress.

It is important that if you are using a bath at home for relaxation in early labour (latent phase) that it is just comfortably warm as using water which is too warm may slow your labour down. This is why we recommend that you are in confirmed established labour (at least 4cm dilated) before you use a birthing pool.

Can I have any other types of pain relief if I am in the pool?

The use of gas and air (Entonox) whilst you are using water has been shown to be very effective as additional pain relief. If you need something stronger you will need to leave the pool for at least a couple of hours.

Can I get out if I change my mind?

The first reason for use of water for labour and/or birth is at the request of the woman. If you want to get out of the pool you can do so at any stage of your labour.

Some women use the pool for pain relief and get out for the birth. It is important that you discuss your wishes with your midwife when you are in confirmed labour.

You and your midwife will discuss and agree other reasons why you will have to leave the pool when you are in labour. These may include:

- You need stronger pain relief
- Your labour has slowed down
- Signs that your baby is distressed
- Signs that you or your baby are unwell

Most women can exit the pool with minimal help; however in the hospital a hoist or net are available to assist you in an emergency. If you are planning to use the pool in your home your midwife will perform an assessment of the room space and agree an exit plan with you.

Can I use a pool at home?

If you wish to use a pool in your own home you will need to discuss your plans in advance with your Community Midwife. She/he will help and advise you about the use of a pool in the home and perform an assessment of the room where you want to use it to ensure it is safe.

You will need to hire an approved birthing pool and make sure you know how to fill and empty it safely. We recommend that you **do not** hire a pool which can be pre-filled and left heated for several days before labour and birth as there have been reported incidents of infection in babies.

To find out more about your options, please discuss this leaflet and any questions you may have with your midwife or doctor.

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