



Labour and Birth

Warm Water Immersion for Labour & Birth

Benefits of warm water immersion in labour and birth

Water is a natural alternative to medicalised pain relief and has many documented benefits.

These include:

- Provides significant pain relief
- Decreases the need for an epidural
- Increased satisfaction and emotional well-being.
- Greater sense of control in labour
- Provides a feeling of weightlessness - relaxes muscles and improves blood flow.
- Reduction in vaginal tearing and episiotomy rates

Is water birth safe?

The biggest fear for women is that a baby born into water may drown. Your newborn baby has several protective mechanisms to stop them from breathing underwater. When your baby is in the uterus they receive all their oxygen through the umbilical cord

via the placenta. Your baby doesn't actually breathe in the uterus. They practice breathing by moving the appropriate muscles and the diaphragm in a regular and rhythmic pattern from as early as 10 weeks. Just before labour, hormones from the placenta cause the baby's breathing movements to slow down or stop. This protects your baby from breathing throughout labour. Another mechanism is the baby's built in response to the birth process. This causes them to swallow rather than breathe. There are also fluids in the lungs of a newborn baby which actually make it hard for the baby to breathe water in. Finally, the baby has what we call a "dive reflex". This is an automatic response in newborns up to the age of six months which also assists the baby with breastfeeding. The dive reflex occurs when liquid hits the back of the throat causing the glottis to close. This means that liquid is swallowed rather than breathed in. If the birth is uncomplicated and conducted safely, there is no risk of your baby breathing before bringing to the surface of the water.

Who can choose a water birth?

You may choose to discuss water birth with your midwife or doctor during pregnancy. Women that choose water immersion in labour and/or birth include:

- Healthy women who have an uncomplicated single pregnancy at term (37-42 weeks gestation)
- Women who have cephalic presentation (baby's head is down)
- Women with a midwife or labour partner at all times
- Women capable of getting in or out of the bath with minimal help and a BMI less than 35
- Women who understand they may be asked to leave the bath for further care
- You have no identified risk factors
- Women who have not received narcotic analgesia within 2 hrs (eg Pethidine/Morphine)

Restrictions for warm water immersion in labour

- If you have a temperature above 37.5°C
- You have had any significant bleeding
- you have an infection at the time of your labour
- Your labour is not progressing normally
- You have high blood pressure
- You have epilepsy
- You have previously had a baby whose shoulders got stuck when being born
- Have had a previous blood loss of 1000mL or more.

You may be asked to leave the bath if:

- Your temperature goes above 37.5°C
- There is bleeding
- Meconium in the amniotic fluid
- Your baby becomes distressed
- To attend assessment of progress of labour

Preconditions for warm water immersion and water birth

- Encouragement to drink fluids to remain hydrated
- Monitoring of the bath temperature for your comfort and the baby at the time of the birth
- If you choose to birth in the water it is important that the baby is birthed completely under the water.
- Your baby will be kept warm using skin to skin contact, drying your baby's head and keeping the rest of the body under water.
- Your baby will be removed from the water if he/she needs help to breath
- Third stage management will be agreed and planned before the birth.

Further discussions will be had in your antenatal appointment with your midwife. To seek further information about the use of water for labour and/or birth which will help you to be fully prepared for the experience follow the links below

- evidencebasedbirth.com/waterbirth/
- www.cochrane.org/CD000111/PREG_immersion-water-labour-and-birth



GV Health acknowledges the traditional custodians of the land on which we gather. We pay our respects to their Elders, past, present and emerging and celebrate the continuing culture of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples.

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