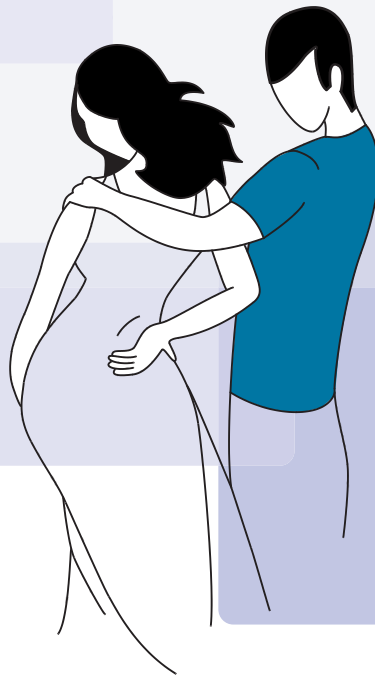


## Do you want a waterbirth?

You may be considering using water when you are in your labour, either just for the labour or to have a waterbirth.

Many midwives and women believe that the use of water for labour and/or for the birth helps you to feel in control and women have said that they found it pleasant and relaxing to be in water during labour.



This leaflet is based on research to help you make your own choice



In collaboration with the Centre for Reviews and Dissemination

This is one of a series of leaflets designed to help you make the right choices for you and your baby.

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However, opinions differ and you may receive conflicting advice about how well waterbirth works and how safe it is. This leaflet tells you what research has found out. It tells you what is known about how safe it is to give birth in water, whether waterbirth will really make your labour easier and what your maternity unit is likely to offer.

## What's on offer

Many maternity units now have a birthing pool but this may not mean that it is available for your use when you are in labour. This might be because, as there is only one pool, someone is already using it or it may be that there are not enough skilled staff available. Midwife-led birth centres and units for 'low risk' women are more likely to have both a pool and enough staff. A few units allow you to bring your own hired pool into the hospital or to use this in your own home.

Your maternity unit will have guidelines about those women who can safely use a pool for their labour and guidance for women whose circumstances make this inadvisable. You may find that the advice will be that only women who have had a straightforward pregnancy and normal labour should consider labour and/or birth in water. Where you have received drugs such as pethidine and where your waters (membranes) have broken for longer than 24 hours, the guidance would be that immersion in water is not advisable.

## Does waterbirth help?

'Gold standard' research studies (randomised controlled trials – RCTs) have found few significant differences between a waterbirth and a birth on 'dry land'. However, other studies have focused on the benefits that mothers and midwives believe waterbirth brings

through their personal experiences of them. These studies suggest that entering water in the first stage of labour can:

- help to shorten the length of your labour
- help you relax and cope better with your contractions
- make you feel more in control
- make the experience more enjoyable
- reduce your need for pain relieving drugs
- reduce the need for drugs that accelerate your labour
- lessen the chance of trauma to your perineum (the area between your vagina and back passage)
- make it more likely that you will achieve a natural birth.

On the other hand, some studies have highlighted that there are risks to the baby, including overheating and infection, and a very small number of babies born under water have died (but it is difficult to be sure about the reason for this and its association with the waterbirth). For this reason, some maternity units may restrict women's use of water to the first stage of labour. There is also a concern that some women may lose more blood at the time of birth, so even if you give birth to your baby in the water, your midwife is likely to ask you to leave the pool to deliver the afterbirth (placenta).

## Common concerns about waterbirth

### Your baby may get too hot

If your body overheats, your baby's heart rate may increase. Your midwife will check the water temperature regularly and it is recommended that this should feel comfortable but not too hot while you are in the first stage of labour. The temperature should be no more than 37°C, dropping to 36-7°C if you stay in the pool for the birth.

### Your baby might develop an infection

Hospitals have to maintain strict standards of pool hygiene. Pools must be thoroughly cleaned between births. If you are interested in a waterbirth some hospitals may ask you to have a blood test to check that you are free from blood-borne infections, such as certain types of hepatitis and HIV.

### Your baby might inhale the water

Many hospitals will ask you to get out of the water or they will drain this away as you are about to give birth.

If you stay in the pool with the water around you, you will be able to give birth and the baby should be born under the water but then lifted up into air so that breathing can start.

## What we don't know

- Does waterbirth raise the chance that a woman's baby may become ill or adversely affected?
- How dilated should the cervix (neck of the womb) be, before a woman is advised to enter the water?
- To what extent does using water affect the length of labour?
- Does the size or shape of the water container affect the birth outcome?
- Can using water lead to a woman or her baby developing infection?
- Are there particular women, who for physical or psychological reasons, would benefit/should avoid using water during labour?



## Your choices

### Before you give birth

Talk to your midwife about waterbirth and ask her if there are any women who have had a waterbirth to whom you could talk. If you are keen to have a waterbirth it would be a good idea to plan how you want to write this into your birth plan. The following tips might help.

- Find out if your maternity unit has a birthing pool.
- Ask how often it is used. This will show whether staff are enthusiastic about waterbirth. It will also show if there are enough trained staff. Evidence suggests that you need one midwife throughout labour and two for the delivery.
- Ask who is allowed to use the pool. Anyone, or only 'low risk' women? Ask what problems in pregnancy or labour could prevent you from using the pool.
- Ask how long you're allowed to stay in the pool. As long as you want, or are you expected to get out before your baby is born?
- Ask what happens if another woman is using the pool.
- Ask if you can use a pool you have hired yourself.

If your unit does not have a pool or can't guarantee to have staff available, you can try to find another unit that can. Consult the Dr Foster Good Birth Guide

([www.drfooster.co.uk](http://www.drfooster.co.uk)), ring the Dr Foster Help at Hand service on 0906 190 0212 or go to [www.birthchoiceuk.com](http://www.birthchoiceuk.com).

Also be aware of the other forms of support and methods of coping in labour if for some reason water is not available or suitable for your needs. See the Informed Choice leaflets, '*Support in labour*', '*Epidural pain relief during labour*' and '*Non-epidural pain relief*' for further information.

## How to find out more

If you want to talk more about a waterbirth, you can discuss this leaflet with your midwife or doctor.

For more detailed information, ask your midwife or doctor for the professionals' version of this leaflet.

## Hiring your own pool

You can use a self-hire pool at home or in hospital.

Some pool hire companies:

**Splashdown Water Birth Services Ltd**  
17 Wellington Terrace, Harrow on the Hill,  
Middlesex HA1 3EP  
Tel: 0870 444 4403 [www.waterbirth.co.uk](http://www.waterbirth.co.uk)

**Active Birth Centre**  
25 Bickerton Road, London N19 5JT  
Tel: 020 7281 6760 [www.activebirthcentre.com](http://www.activebirthcentre.com)

