

Mothering Matters

Parenting in Switzerland

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WATER BIRTH

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Many people think that water birth is a 20th century invention; however, this could actually not be further from the truth. There are indeed tales of generations of women in the South Pacific giving birth in shallow seawater. In addition, women have used water for centuries to relieve both menstrual and labour pains.

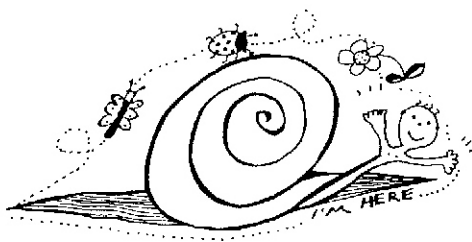
What does it feel like?

Women who have experienced a water birth state that they liked the feeling of being in their own private space, without an IV. They also enjoyed moving freely in water: gliding from one position to another, circling, tilting the pelvis, and kneeling forward and backward while feeling weightless.

Many women have found that immersion in deep, warm water during labour allows them to relax, and provides much relief from the discomfort of contractions. Women can choose to get out of the water in the second stage to prepare for delivery of their baby. Alternatively, some continue to give birth in the water, so that the baby's first moments of life outside the uterus are under water.

Advantages

- ❖ Private, thus providing one with feelings of security and control.
- ❖ Provides a low-tech way of conducting labour with fewer interventions. Note that the baby can still be monitored using a stethoscope or a hand-held Doppler with a waterproof cover.
- ❖ Very good pain relief, be it soon after immersion into water, or within 15 minutes.
- ❖ Ability to try different comfort positions due to depth of pool. Less energy is required to support the body in water.
- ❖ Accompaniment of dimmed lights and aromatherapy oils can also aid relaxation. Note: use of these oils must be discussed with your doctor to ensure safety.
- ❖ Lowered blood pressure through relaxation.
- ❖ Less rushed birthing atmosphere. The second stage of labour can take longer, which may be due to less pressure on the mother to push.
- ❖ Overall gentler entry into the world for baby.



Safety concerns

Research is still limited on the possible disadvantages, or even dangers for the mother and baby. However, most birth units have developed their own guidelines and protocols, and over the years practices have been standardised to make them safer.

- ❖ Water temperature – this should be monitored and adjusted to the mother's comfort as women vary in what temperature is beneficial for them. During labour the water should be between 32°C and 36°C. For delivery, the water should be between 36°C and 37°C.
- ❖ Water depth – this is best measured by asking the mother to kneel resting on her heels. The water should then cover her belly, resting just below the breasts.
- ❖ Mother's temperature – this should be monitored regularly and the mother should be encouraged to drink plenty to prevent over-heating.
- ❖ Baby's heart rate – this should be monitored with a waterproof foetal heart monitor to ensure baby's safety throughout labour and detect any signs of foetal distress.
- ❖ Water embolism – in the early days of water birth, some obstetricians were concerned that water could enter the uterus and then the mother's bloodstream through the placenta. However, the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists have acknowledged that this has never happened in the thousands of water births that have taken place.

- ❖ Baby's first breath – Babies have inbuilt physiological reflexes that prevent inhalation of water. However, it is crucial to maintain the right conditions to support this reflex, including slowly bringing baby to the surface with minimal touching of baby's head and face, and maintaining pool temperature at 37°C.

How to organise a water birth

Hospital water birth

As the practice of water birth has become more common, hospitals have compiled their own policies, taking into account current research.

Women interested in a water birth in hospital ought to speak to a health nurse, doctor, or midwife. Some midwives might be able to provide support in labour, or to give contact detail of another midwife who has more experience of water birth.

Some hospitals also run a special antenatal session water birth. If your local hospital doesn't have the facilities for water births, the midwives may be willing to use a pool which you have hired. It is advisable to make this arrangement in writing before you go to the expense of hiring the pool.

Home water birth

If you are planning a home birth, you could hire a midwife to attend your home water birth. Look into local organisations offering midwives experienced in home and water birth. The other option is to discuss with the midwives at your local hospital if they are willing to attend you at home. If you choose this route then do consider the following points:

- ❖ Be aware of the length of time over which you can hire the pool – often for the three weeks before and two weeks after your due date.
- ❖ Pool weight – is your floor strong enough to bear the weight of a full pool (about 2,000 lbs)?
- ❖ Ensure there is enough room to walk around at least two thirds of the pool. The pool hire company provide all hoses, tap attachments and linings that are

required. Some also provide circulating water heaters and conditioning chemicals but this depends on the hire company and their policies.

Water birth has the potential to provide a special atmosphere for baby's entry into the world. Careful research and analysis of the various options will ensure the best chance for a pleasant and successful experience for both mother and baby. ✦

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