
Waterbirth

Adapted from Pomegranate Midwives

Water birth around the world

Water is revered in every culture for its life-sustaining and healing properties. People have been using water in labour and birth for millennia. Ancient Egyptian petroglyphs depict water births of babies destined to become priests or priestesses. The oral histories of indigenous peoples on every continent – from New Zealand to Mongolia, Panama to Japan – include stories about people giving birth in ocean tide pools, in streams and in shallow lakes.

In the 1960s, Igor Tjarkovsky, a swimming instructor and midwife, popularized water birth in Russia. In 1983, Herman Ponette, an obstetrician, began installing birthing tubs in his hospital in Belgium. Since then, he has attended over 5,500 water births.

In the United Kingdom, even the government recognizes the potential benefits of water birth. In 1992, the UK House of Commons recommended that whenever possible, people have the option to birth in water. Nearly half of all maternity hospitals in the UK have installed birthing pools and there are at least 2,000 water births per year.

What are the benefits of water birth?

Many people find that being immersed in water during labour and birth gives them an increased sense of control, comfort and relaxation. If you are the kind of person who enjoys spending time in water, you may enjoy the following benefits from birthing your baby in water:

- You may feel more relaxed and better able to cope with your contractions
- You may need less pain medication because your contractions are easier to cope with
- You may find it easier to move intuitively to ease your baby through your pelvis
- Your cervix may open faster and your labour may be shorter
- You may have less need for medication to help your labour because your contractions work better
- You may have less need for help from forceps, vacuum or caesarean to give birth to your baby
- You may have less need for an episiotomy and less chance of having a serious tear

Some people have also suggested that water birth is a gentler experience for the baby as well as for the pregnant person.

Is water birth safe?

The research about the safety of water birth is not conclusive. However, the existing studies seem to suggest that birthing in water is a safe option for people with healthy pregnancies and uncomplicated labours.

Studies have found that when compared with land birth, water birth is associated with:

- Similar or lower rates of infection in pregnant people and babies
- Similar or better results on tests that evaluate the baby's wellbeing after birth
- Similar or lower rates of babies admitted to special care nurseries
- Similar or lower rates of baby deaths

What stops babies from breathing underwater?

A number of factors inhibit babies from breathing underwater at the time of birth:

Hormones: You might be surprised to learn that your baby has already begun practicing breathing before birth, inside the uterus. Researchers have observed breathing movements in the human fetus as much as 40% of the time. However, in the days before labour begins, breathing activity decreases dramatically because of prostaglandins, hormones released by the placenta which also play a role in starting labour.

Temperature: Newborn babies are sensitive to temperature. They are stimulated to breathe by the cooler temperature of air compared to the warm environment inside the pregnant person. However, when born into water that is at a similar temperature to the pregnant person's body temperature, they are not stimulated to breathe.

Dive Reflex: Humans have a powerful dive reflex which maximizes their ability to hold their breath underwater. This reflex is associated with the larynx, the opening to the lower airway. The opening to the larynx is covered with more taste buds than the entire surface of the tongue. These taste buds can distinguish between bodily fluids (like mucus, urine, blood, or amniotic fluid) and other foreign fluids (like water). When they encounter a foreign fluid, they elicit the dive reflex. The opening to the airway closes and the fluid is swallowed, not inhaled. In addition, nerves in the face sense when the face is immersed in water and send messages to the brain. The brain responds by inhibiting breathing, decreasing heart rate, and redirecting blood to the brain and heart where it is needed most. This reflex helps to prevent babies from gasping for air when they are born underwater.

Hypoxia: Babies are born experiencing acute hypoxia, meaning they are temporarily lacking oxygen. This inhibits breathing. However, babies born experiencing severe, prolonged lack of oxygen may gasp for air. As a result, your care provider will monitor your baby's well being during labour. If there are any signs that your baby may be experiencing a prolonged lack of oxygen, your care provider will ask you to get out of the water.

Guidelines for water birth

Whether at home or the hospital, there are some situations where birthing in the water may not be clinically advisable and your provider may ask you to get out at the last minute. Certain providers have different levels of experience and comfort with delivering the baby and/or the placenta in the tub, therefore you should ask beforehand, if this is important to you. As well, if you are planning to birth in hospital, you should check both what the facilities are like, and what your hospital's policy is regarding waterbirth.

To help keep you and your baby safe while having a water birth you need to:

- be having a healthy pregnancy
- be 37 weeks gestation or later
- be in a warm (not hot) bath (between 36-37.5°C)
- have no strong medications such as morphine
- leave the water if your care provider has any concerns with your or your baby's wellbeing

What supplies do I need for a water birth at home?

To provide optimal pain relief, the water level needs to be deep enough to cover your whole belly. Therefore, unless your home has a deep soaker tub, a labor tub will likely need to be rented or bought.

- Birth pool – cheaper to buy; rentals usually have a heater
- Garden/waterbed hose, new
- Sink faucet attachment for hose, with reverse/draining ability (Y adaptor) – from aquarium/pet store
- Pump – foot or electric for inflatable pool
- Plastic and towels to surround pool
- Fish aquarium net (large size)
- Yoga mat for floor close to the pool
- Lots of extra towels
- Bath pillow, if sides not soft

Water Birth Resources

Websites

- www.waterbirth.org
- www.waterbirthinfo.com
- www.babycenter.ca/pregnancy/labourandbirth/waterbirth
- www.waterbirthstore.org
- www.geocities.com/hotsprings/2840/whywater
- www.yourwaterbirth.com

Books

- CHOOSING WATERBIRTH – by Lakshmi Bertram
- GENTLE BIRTH CHOICES – by Barbara Harper
- WATER BIRTH: AN ATTITUDE TO CARE– by Diane Garland (2001)

Explores the practical issues of setting up a water birthing facility both at home and in a hospital environment, explains issues of maternal and newborn physiology, and discusses practical aspects of care during and after use of a birthing pool.

- THE WATER BIRTH BOOK – by Janet Balaskas (2004)

This comprehensive guide from the UK author of Active Birth includes the history of birthing in water, the benefits of water in labour, choosing a water birth, and preparing for a water birth.

- WE ARE ALL WATER BABIES – by Jessica Johnson and Michel Odent (1995)

Photography and text exploring our links with water from birth to death.

DVDs

- Birth Day (66 min)

Shows the birth of a midwife's third child in her hot tub at her home in Xalapa, Mexico

- The Art of Birth (29 min)

Australian film shows four gentle births in water (two in birth centers and two at home)

- Birth Into Being: The Russian Waterbirth Experience (28 min)

Shows two births in the Black Sea and two births at home in a clear birthing pool

Research

Gilbert RE. Tookey PA. Perinatal mortality and morbidity among babies delivered in water: surveillance study and postal survey. *BMJ*. 319(7208):483-7, 1999 Aug 21.

Keirse MJ. Challenging water birth — how wet can it get?. *Birth*. 32(4):318-22, 2005 Dec.

Cluett ER. Nikodem VC. McCandlish RE. Burns EE. Immersion in water in pregnancy, labour and birth. *Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews*. (2):CD000111, 2004.

Johnson P. Birth under water—to breathe or not to breathe. *British Journal of Obstetrics & Gynaecology*. 103(3):202-8, 1996 Mar.