

The use of water for labour and birth



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Feeling relaxed, secure and in control and being able to move about freely can make it more likely for you to have a quicker and more natural birth. For some women using a birthing pool can offer all of these benefits.



Today more and more women are considering using water for pain relief in labour. A midwife can support you in using a birthing pool at home or in our midwife-led units at Colchester General Hospital and Clacton and Harwich hospitals in the community. Using a birthing pool is likely to increase the chances of a normal vaginal delivery and therefore we would like to offer this option to as many women as possible.

We have compiled this leaflet to give you and your partner relevant information about labouring and giving birth in water. Please talk to your midwife during the antenatal period who will be able to answer any questions you may have.

Leaflet name	Water birth
Leaflet number	1112n1
Created	July 2013
Reviewed	
Next review	July 2015

Benefits of labouring in water

There are many benefits to labouring and giving birth in water. These include:

- Less painful contractions
- The relaxing effect of warm water helps produce endorphins – promoting the body's natural pain relief mechanism
- Less need for analgesia (pain relief) such as pethidine or epidurals
- Less need for drugs that accelerate labour such as oxytocin
- Shorter labour
- Feelings of being in control
- A birthing pool supports 75% of a labouring woman's weight, allowing the woman to feel buoyant and comfortable. Mobility is easier, thus conserving a woman's energy for labour
- You are more likely to achieve a natural birth
- A more enjoyable labour experience
- Water helps to relax the pelvic floor muscles and soften the perineum (the skin between the vagina and the anus), thus reducing the risk of tearing
- A more gentle birth for the baby
- Breastfeeding can be encouraged immediately.

Risks of labouring in water

For healthy women with an uncomplicated term pregnancy, complications are seemingly rare.

A concern for some people is that the baby will breathe whilst still under the water – this is highly unlikely as there are many mechanisms that prevent this from happening, one of which is the drop in temperature that normally occurs when a baby is born. The water temperature is carefully monitored throughout labour to prevent this drop.

Ensuring the baby's head is totally submerged during delivery also prevents the breathing reflex from starting until the head is clear of the water.

Is a water birth suitable for me?

Generally, if you are healthy and between 37 and 42 weeks pregnant, have experienced a normal pregnancy with no serious medical conditions or complications you are suitable to use water for labour and/or birth if labour started spontaneously. You should also be in established labour with strong regular contractions.

Pain relief

Using water in labour is an effective form of pain relief. Some women find they want to use the birthing pool for pain relief only, and give birth to their baby out of the water.

Should you require any further coping strategies it may be useful to try breathing and relaxation techniques, massage or gas and air (Entonox), all of which can be used while in the pool. If you require an injection of pethidine or an epidural you will need to leave the pool. You will not be allowed to get into the birthing pool within four hours of receiving a pain-relieving injection.

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Water temperature

The temperature of the water should be comfortable for you. To ensure you and your baby do not become too hot or too cold we recommend the water temperature is between 35°C and 37°C in the first stage of labour and 37°C for the birth. The midwife will check your temperature, the water and room temperature every hour. You will also be encouraged to drink extra water throughout labour to prevent dehydration.

The birth of your baby

As you near the end of your labour you will know if you wish to give birth in the pool or leave the pool for the birth of the baby. Giving birth in the pool is carried out with a hands-off approach. Your midwife will be able to give you verbal guidance when the baby is about to be delivered when the midwife, yourself or your partner gently brings the baby to the surface of the water. This is to avoid the baby breathing when underwater.

Once the baby has been born the head must not go back into the water in order to prevent inhaling water. Babies born in water tend to have their eyes open and be very calm. Sometimes the baby may take a short time to become pink. This is because the birth has been very gentle and is normal.

Delivering the placenta

If labour and delivery have continued normally it is ideal for your body to deliver the placenta without the need for drugs.

This usually takes place out of the water.

Reasons why you may need to leave the pool

You may be asked to leave the pool for the following reasons:

- To use the toilet
- If there is difficulty in hearing your baby's heart rate or any irregularities in the baby's heart rate
- You may be requested to leave the pool for a vaginal examination (although they can take place in water)
- If your blood pressure, pulse or temperature become abnormal
- If your labour does not progress as expected
- In order to deliver the placenta.

You can choose to leave the pool at any time during labour, except when the head is about to deliver.

How will I be cared for during labour and birth in water?

To maintain the benefits of labouring in water we will try to create a calm, unhurried and relaxed atmosphere. We will encourage you verbally when necessary and disturb you as little as possible at other times.

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We will need to listen to your baby's heart rate and regularly check your temperature, pulse and blood pressure. You will be supported in labour by a midwife and your birth partner.

Two midwives are usually present at the birth of your baby.

What should I wear?

It is important that you feel relaxed and in control during labour so the choice of what you wear is entirely up to you. Some women like to be naked when they give birth and find clothing gets in the way, being naked also allows skin-to-skin contact to take place straight away. Others feel more comfortable if they are wearing a long T-shirt which covers their body.

You may want to bring a dressing gown because you can become cold very quickly if you need to leave the pool for any reason, eg to go to the toilet.

What should I do if I think I would like water birth?

If you are interested in a water birth please discuss this with your midwife at your antenatal appointment so your wishes can be documented.

If you would like to use a birthing pool for a home birth you can either hire or buy one from any number of specialist organisations. You may find it helpful to attend water birth workshops or seek support from organisations such as the National Childbirth Trust or the Homebirth Support Group.

The following is a list of useful contacts:

www.birthpoolinabox.co.uk

www.aquabirth.co.uk

www.birthworks.co.uk

www.nct.org.uk

www.homebirth.org.uk

To book a waterbirth workshop call 01206 742424.

Concerns or complaints

If you have any concerns or worries about your care, please contact the department responsible. However, if you are unable to resolve your concerns or wish to make a formal complaint, please contact the Integrated PALS (Patient Advice and Liaison Service), Complaints and Litigation Service on 01206 745926 or ask any member of staff for a leaflet, which will describe how you may make a complaint.

Your NHS number

When you attend hospital you will be asked for your NHS number and other information such as your address. Please be patient with this procedure – it is to

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ensure our records are kept up to date and to protect your safety. However, if you do not know your NHS number, please don't worry – you will still receive care!

Your views

If you or a family member has recently been in either Colchester General Hospital or Essex County Hospital for any reason, you can tell us about your experience by visiting the www.nhs.uk website and then click on the "Comments" section.

The Trust respects patients' views on our services and would greatly appreciate hearing from you if you have any comments on this leaflet. If so you can phone the Patient Information Service on 01206 742930, write to the address on the front of this leaflet or email your comments to info@colchesterhospital.nhs.uk

References

Colchester Hospital University NHS Foundation Trust Directorate of Women Children and Families Maternity Services (2005). Guidelines for the use of the birthing pool and waterbirths.

Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists/Royal College of Midwives (2006). Joint statement on immersion in water during labour and birth.

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