



**At the Royal Women's Hospital you can choose to labour and birth in water if it is considered safe for you and your baby. You can use the following information to have a discussion with your doctor or midwife at your next clinic appointment.**

## Why water?

Water is simple, effective and readily available and has many potential benefits in labour and during the birth. Throughout your pregnancy, you may already have found that water makes you feel more comfortable. Women often like to swim during pregnancy or spend time relaxing in the bath because it provides a sense of weightlessness. Water helps with aches and pains and also makes you feel more relaxed.

During labour and birth, the benefits of water can include:

- increased comfort and mobility
- a deeper sense of relaxation
- increased capacity to tolerate pain
- improved blood flow to the baby.

## Is water birth safe?

The biggest fear for women is that a baby born into water may drown. Remember, until the birth, your baby is surrounded by fluid and never at risk of breathing it in.

Your newborn baby actually has several protective mechanisms to stop them from breathing under water. First of all, when your baby is in the uterus, they receive all of their oxygen through the umbilical cord, via the placenta. Your baby doesn't actually breathe in the uterus, but they do 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.

Other mechanisms include; the baby's built in response to the birth process, which 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 is called a "dive reflex", which is an automatic response in newborns up to the age of six months and assists the baby with breastfeeding. The dive reflex occurs when liquid hits the back of the throat causing the glottis to close so 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 they are brought to the surface of the water.

## Who can use the bath for labour?

Safety is the most important consideration when we consider whether you are a good candidate for a water birth.

At the Women's, you can use the bath during labour if:

- you are free of any medical conditions that could be triggered during labour and put you at risk, these include epilepsy and high blood pressure
- there is no danger of infection to you, your baby or your carers
- you are more than 37 weeks pregnant
- continuous monitoring is not required throughout the labour
- you can get in and out of the bath yourself without assistance
- your BMI is under 30 or you weigh less than 90kgs at labour. This is because the staff need to be able to easily move you out of the bath in the event that you can't move yourself.

You and your midwife will have a discussion before the birth to make sure a water birth is a safe option for you and your baby.

## Birthing in the bath

You will be able to give birth in the bath if:

- your temperature is normal (below 37.5)
- there are no medical reasons that require you or the baby to be continuously monitored
- you can easily get in and out of the bath with minimal assistance (between contractions)
- your labour has progressed smoothly and there are no complications during the second stage
- your baby's heart beat remains normal
- you are willing to leave the bath on the advice of the medical staff
- your midwifery or medical staff has been trained in safe water birth practice (or is in training and there is a supervising midwife available for the birth).

Water birth is available to all women who:

- are prepared and have had a discussion with a doctor or midwife
- have not had epidural or pain medication
- accept that they may have to leave the bath if advised to do so
- are attended throughout by a doctor or midwife who is confident and experienced in water birth.

## Other information

There is a high quality review of the research on this issue at the in the Cochrane Library, conducted by the Cochrane Pregnancy and Childbirth Group. The web address is:

- <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/14651858.CD000111.pub3/abstract;jsessionid=F45FD45087FB276013113EFF655B7041.d01t02>

Cluett ER, Burns E. Immersion in water in labour and birth. Cochrane Database of Systematic Reviews 2009, Issue 2. Art. No.: CD000111. DOI: 10.1002/14651858.CD000111.pub3.