



Question: What are the benefits and risks of waterbirth for mothers and babies?

Answer: The available research shows that waterbirth has many benefits for mothers. Evidence has also shown that babies born in the water have similar health outcomes compared to babies born on land. However, the evidence is not strong enough to look at rare adverse effects or potential long-term benefits or harms of waterbirth.

Evidence: In 2017, researchers pooled 39 studies and compared over 12,500 hospital waterbirths to nearly 16,000 hospital land births.¹ There were no differences in any health outcome including NICU admissions, Apgar scores, breathing difficulty, need for resuscitation, infection rates, umbilical cord pH, or low body temperature between babies born in water or on land.

The largest randomized trial to ever examine waterbirth was conducted in 2013 at a hospital in Iran;² 100 people were assigned to waterbirth and 100 people were assigned to land birth. They found that fewer people assigned to waterbirth had Cesareans compared to those assigned to land birth (5% versus 16%). People in the waterbirth group also reported less pain with labor compared to the land birth group. There was less meconium in the mother's amniotic fluid with waterbirth (2% versus 24%) and fewer low Apgar scores.

The largest observational study ever on waterbirth – and first to report results from the U.S. – included over 6,500 waterbirths attended by midwives at homes and birth centers.³ For mothers and babies, waterbirth was associated with fewer postpartum transfers to the hospital and fewer hospital admissions during the first 6 weeks postpartum. However, the people who completed waterbirths were also the ones at lowest risk for health problems. There were no differences in newborn death rates or Apgar scores between water and land births. For unknown reasons, they found that mothers who gave birth in the water experienced a small increase in mild labial tears. Other researchers have found a decrease or elimination of episiotomies (cutting the vagina with scissors) with waterbirth.⁴

What do professional organizations say about waterbirth?¹

The American College of Nurse Midwives, American Association of Birth Centers, and the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists in the United Kingdom, all support waterbirth as an option for healthy women. The American Congress of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (ACOG) came out with a strong statement against waterbirth in 2014. In 2016, they updated their Opinion Statement to state that the potential risks have not been sufficiently studied to support or encourage a person's request to give birth in water. They continue to recommend that birth occur on land, not in water. However, they acknowledge the maternal benefits of water immersion during labor and support informed choice and more research on waterbirth.^{5,6}

What's the bottom line?

The bottom line is that waterbirth is a reasonable option for low-risk birthing people, as long as they understand the potential benefits and risks. If women have a strong desire for waterbirth, and there are care providers who are comfortable attending waterbirths, then at this time there is no evidence to deny this option of pain relief.

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“Evidence shows that babies born in the water have similar health outcomes compared to babies born on land.”

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5. American Congress of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (2016). "Immersion in Water During Labor and Delivery". Obstet Gynecol 128:231-236.
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