



*Evidence that Empowers!*

By Rebecca Dekker, PhD, RN of EvidenceBasedBirth.com

## Question: What is waterbirth?

**Answer:** With *water immersion in labor*, you get into a tub or pool of warm water during labor before your baby is born. In a *waterbirth*, you remain in the water during the pushing phase and actual birth of the baby. The baby is then brought to the surface of the water after birth.

## Question: What are the benefits and risks of waterbirth?

**Answer:** Research shows that waterbirth has many benefits for birthing people, and that babies born in the water have similar health outcomes compared to babies born on land.

There have been five small, randomized trials on waterbirth.<sup>1-5</sup> These studies showed that waterbirth benefits include lower pain scores, less use of pain medication, less use of Pitocin<sup>®</sup>, shorter labors, higher rate of normal vaginal birth, higher rate of intact perineum, less use of episiotomy, and greater satisfaction with the birth. There was no evidence of harm, but the studies were too small to identify rare problems.

Because large, randomized trials are unlikely to be published, we can turn to other types of evidence about waterbirth. In observational studies, researchers do not control who gives birth in the water, but they record how people birth and measure their health outcomes.

The largest and highest-quality review of water immersion in labor and/or waterbirth<sup>6</sup> included 36 studies (mostly observational studies; 25 focused on waterbirth) from 2000 through 2021. There were 157,546 participants in the analysis. The researchers found that laboring and/or giving birth in the water was associated with the following health results:

- Less use of Pitocin<sup>®</sup> to speed up labor.
- Less use of injectable opioids for pain management.
- Less use of epidurals.
- Reduced pain levels.
- Higher rates of intact perineum in hospital settings.
- Lower rates of episiotomy.
- Lower risk of postpartum hemorrhage.
- Lower rates of maternal infection.
- Higher rates of maternal satisfaction.

There were no differences between water immersion and/or waterbirth vs. no water immersion with newborn breathing problems, Apgar scores, or infant death. The only drawback for newborns was a higher rate of cord avulsion (snapping of the umbilical cord after birth) which is treatable by identifying the cord avulsion and clamping the cord immediately. The largest study on cord avulsion found that it occurs in 0.57% of waterbirths vs. 0.37% of births on land.<sup>7</sup>

## Question: What do professional organizations say?

**Answer:** The American College of Nurse Midwives, American Association of Birth Centers, and the Royal College of Midwives all support waterbirth as an option. The American Congress of Obstetricians and Gynecologists (ACOG) came out with a strong statement against waterbirth in 2014. In 2016, they updated their Opinion (reaffirmed in 2021) to state that potential risks have not been sufficiently studied to support a request to give birth in water. They continue to recommend that birth occur on land. However, they acknowledge the maternal benefits and support informed choice and more research on waterbirth.

## Question: What's the bottom line?

**Answer:** Waterbirth is a safe and beneficial option for low-risk families. If you have a strong desire for waterbirth, and there are care providers who are skilled in attending waterbirths, then you should not be denied this option for pain relief.

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“Evidence shows that waterbirth is a safe option that decreases pain, lowers interventions, and protects the perineum.”

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